

## Ethics of Theosophy

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Paper read before the Brighton Branch of the Theosophical Society, May 16th, 1892

Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 5

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

[Page 12] I SUPPOSE it may be taken for granted that all of you understand sufficiently well what is implied in the title of this paper. By Ethics, I mean that department of enquiry which deals with conduct — how each person should conduct himself in the several relations of life so as to fulfil, to the best of his ability, the duties he owes to himself, and to the community of which he forms a part. No one in his senses could doubt that there is a distinction between right and wrong, that some actions are good and others bad. Nor is there much difference of opinion as to what class of actions generally are good and what evil — that love is better than hatred, truth-speaking than falsehood, honesty than fraud. So far we all seem to start from the same beginnings and to speak the same language. It is when we come down to particular acts, complicated by variety of circumstance, that the divergence begins. As the politician remarked: "When a general election comes on I always lock my conscience in a box", and was somewhat at a loss when his friend replied: "And do you always find it there when it's over?" so the Jesuit maintains that we should always speak the truth, except when the interests of the Church are concerned. And the man with a theory which he is pledged to uphold, will shuffle, equivocate, and resort to all kinds of doubtful expedients, rather than acknowledge that the facts are against him, and that his system is incapable of defence.

Here then are three instances that serve to illustrate my first proposition — that all men are agreed on the fundamental rules of conduct; but when they come to the application of a rule, they plead so many exceptions, that, as an instrument of guidance, it loses all its value.

It might seem, perhaps, that in a system of Ethics, a remedy for this would be to lay down special precepts applicable to every variety of circumstance with no loophole for escape (for honest persons at [Page 13] least) by way of exceptions. Well, Theosophy has not attempted this; but has wisely abstained from it. Human life is not a sum in arithmetic that can be gone through mechanically. The rule that suits one set of circumstances will not suit another. Moreover, rules in course of time get obsolete and unsuited to modern requirements. Let them be the very best that could be thought of, collected, into a book and even backed with a claim to divine authority, if they are behind advancing knowledge nothing can save them. As they cannot be got rid of the usual method is to change their meaning, and then you get hypocrisy. "Yes", is declared to mean "No"; "Do this", means "Don't do it"; "Thou shalt" is, "Thou shalt not".

Take for instance that one commandment of the Decalogue which might be supposed to receive universal assent, "Thou shalt do no murder". It reads as though it pointed to the sacredness of human life. Doubtless it did so on one side of the Jordan, but no sooner have they crossed to the opposite bank

than it means, "Thou shalt not kill Jews", and an order is issued for indiscriminate slaughter of the natives. Compare the *New Testament* rule of meekness with the present state of naval and military armaments in Europe; the prohibition of an oath for strengthening affirmation with the practice of our law courts; the precept, when one's coat is stolen, to reward the thief with another article of clothing with the universal rule of appeal to the policeman; the warning against laying up treasures with the provident habit of accumulation for future contingencies and future needs, and listen moreover to the defence of this discrepancy between profession and practice. "We follow, not the letter, but the spirit of the rules", or in other and more honest words, "We turn the rules just upside down and observe the exact contrary of what we profess". So much for rules laid down by authority, subscribed to as sacred and dismissed as impracticable. What then has Theosophy to say on this department of Ethics?

Its characteristic feature, as distinguished from other ethical systems, is that, for definite rules it substitutes a principle which every candidate for admission is required to acknowledge, *viz.*, that all mankind are brethren and should be treated as such. It has no other standard of orthodoxy. All other subjects are open for discussion. This one is closed.

It is not thereby pretended that all men are equal. They are not equal, and nothing can ever make them so. The ground of relationship is simply declared to be irrespective of nationality or creed.

As the guiding law of the Society, it can hardly be maintained [Page 14] that it errs on the side of narrowness. Nor is there any high-flown mystery about it that might lead an enquirer to object: "This is a hard saying, I pray you have me excused". The only objections I have ever heard to it are of a widely different kind — that it is not new, that it is commonplace, that it is borrowed from the *New Testament* and so universally assented to that there is no need for its insertion. Now I hold that every one of these objections is mistaken. That to a large proportion of educated people the doctrine is both new and unwelcome. That it is not borrowed from the *New Testament*, but is in flat opposition to it, and that so far from being universally assented to, it is to Jews, Christians, Mahometans, and the whole caste population of India, an unholy and sacrilegious doctrine tending to obliterate the distinctions of their respective creeds by placing the sceptic on a level with the true believer.

The Jew is instructed to take advantage of Gentiles in ways prohibited in dealing with those of his own persuasion, "To a stranger thou mayest lend on usury, but to thy brother thou shalt not lend on usury" (Deut., xxiii. 20). He might trade with a Gentile for profit, but must not hold friendly intercourse with him. It was brought as a charge against Peter, "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised and didst eat with them" (Acts, xi. 3). Now, what does improved Judaism in the form of Christianity teach on that subject?

It extends the prospect of happiness in another world to men of other nations on condition of their holding Christian opinions. But here, in this world, in what relation does man stand to his fellow man — as brethren or aliens? The word brother or brethren occurs more than one hundred times in the *New Testament*, but always in a theological sense in which the common brotherhood of humanity is as completely ignored as though converted and unconverted were denizens of two different planets.

The estimate of one's neighbour and of the amount of friendliness towards him was based on doctrinal conformity. The creed came first, the man afterwards.

It is true the growth of tolerance in the Jewish mind had long before Christian times eliminated the more barbarous features of the old religion. Time was when, if a Jew addressed his petitions to the wrong deity, his brother Jew was instructed to kill him forthwith. — (Deut., xvii. 5.)

Subsequently, under Greek and Roman rule, such practices were no longer tolerated. But the religious instinct of his nation was suppressed in its exercise, not killed. The fervour of orthodox conviction [Page 15] burned in his veins as fiercely as ever, and the Jew turned Christian was not a whit behind his ancestors in denouncing the wickedness of those who failed to recognize the value of the new doctrines. "If any one come unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into thine house" (2 John, verse 10). He might indeed be the sincerest, best and most worthy of characters, but it must go for nothing. The creed wasn't right; the evangelical catechism wasn't repeated properly; he was not a fit person to associate with, and the rule was absolute, "Shut the door on him". Is there nothing of this noticeable in our day? Or is it true that those who repeat the formulas have in every instance grown wiser and better in learning to respect such conscientious differences of opinion as must necessarily exist on subjects so remote from human apprehension? If so, the Theosophical rule is obsolete and useless. But if, on the other hand, when we look around we see house divided against house, sect against sect, and man hopelessly at variance with his fellow-man because the two cannot see through each other's eyes or read with the same spectacles, then I think the Society has done wisely to bring this principle into the forefront as a protest against exclusiveness, and as the best expression of the views they hold on the subject of human brotherhood.

Here then we reach the central core of its ethical system. It might be summed up in a single word — altruism as opposed to selfishness, charity to one's neighbour divested of every form of self-seeking in so far as it claims to be charity, regard for the happiness of man as man, not as a co-religionist or a white man or a native of this or that country, but the best happiness of the greatest number whoever they may be or wherever found. Charity stripped of these conditions ceases to be charity. It is self-seeking under an assumed name. I fear we borrow much of that doubtful article from our old friend the Jew. His notions of benevolence were not of that unmixed character that should recommend them to universal acceptance. When we read, "He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord," we are struck with a something foreign to the idea of genuine charity, as if somehow a wrong note had been struck. It seems to have in it so much in common with a commercial transaction, of investing one's money at a high rate of interest with undeniable security and on the same terms we are accustomed to find in the prospectus of a limited company.

No doubt the Christian ideal is in almost every particular in advance of the Jewish one, but the idea of disinterestedness, which is the very soul and essence of genuine altruism, finds no place in it. Perhaps the nearest approach to it anywhere in the *New Testament* is [Page 16] that truly noble and most unpharisaic injunction, "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth". But the prohibition there is not against self-seeking but against publicity — giving alms to be seen of men — and the reason assigned is that by doing so you forego the reward you would otherwise receive.

The expectation of repayment in kind is no doubt a very natural one, and it is not for me to question its propriety in any given instance. All I contend for is that it is not a very high one, and the nearer we approach to self-forgetfulness in our efforts to do good, the less will this aspect of philanthropy engage our thoughts with a view to any prospective advantage.

If there is one element in our nature that more than another needs to be kept under wholesome restraint it is cupidity — the desire of getting and having, and to encourage in ourselves that instinct, or its future gratification as an inducement to do what would otherwise be dictated by conscience and good feeling, is to strike a chord so low down in the scale as scarcely to deserve the name of goodness at all.

Now Theosophy, as fully as any other system I know of, recognizes advantage of some sort from every act conscientiously and unselfishly performed, but not by way of direct bestowment or specific reward. It comes to us naturally and unfailingly, just as nourishment from food, or health from exercise in the open air. The sum of our good deeds will reflect itself in our characters. We shall take less thought of the creditor account. We shall learn to do what is right because it is right, irrespective of consequence, and in everything we purpose for the good of another put self as far as possible out of the question.

A word in conclusion on the source of strength for fulfilment of duty. A watch cannot go without a mainspring, or an engine without steam to drive it. What then is the motive power we are to reckon upon in the human machine? Are we "insufficient in ourselves to do anything of ourselves", or must we look to an energy without us?

There is no need to dogmatize on either side of the question. There is an element of truth in both statements. Probably neither of them is true to the entire exclusion of the other. There is a spirit in man and a spirit without him, infinite and in its essence unapproachable. In that spirit we live and move and have our being in ceaseless dependence on external aid.

But this doctrine once learnt, there is no need to be for ever insisting on it as if it contained the whole truth, as is the fashion with a certain class of teachers. It is a mistake to suppose that this [Page 17] doctrine of divine assistance has any special application to Ethics or religion.

It is equally true of every act we perform, mental, moral, mechanical or otherwise, and there is a touch of cant in the perpetual repetition of it as though external aid could be dispensed with in minor acts and ordinary occupations.

There is at least as much risk in undue dependence on sources from without as on sources from, within. The so-called "divine promises", whatever their real origin, have in any case filtered through a human brain. There is no evading this fact and its necessary inferences. A wise man will think twice before committing himself to the open sea of doubts and difficulties connected with this question.

And the same caution is needed in trusting to perpetual help and guidance from admittedly human sources. The habit is indolent and enervating. A limb that is never used becomes atrophied by neglect. Learn to swim with bladders and you will never float without them. The man with a ready reckoner always in his pocket will never learn to count. The woman with a priest always at her elbow may mutter the prayers and perform the ceremonies, but her intellect and conscience are the property of another, and for counsel or aid in any useful matter she is commonly the most miserable wreck of helpless humanity to be seen anywhere on this planet. We must think for ourselves and learn to conquer difficulties.

There is no royal road to Ethics — no catalogue of rules available for service apart from experience, and if there were, and some book could teach it, it would, I am sure, be a hundred times better for you to find it out for yourselves.