

## The Ethics of Theosophy

by Kate Hillard

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"In him who knows that all spiritual beings are the same in kind with the Supreme Spirit, what room can there be for delusion of mind, and what room for sorrow, when he reflects on the identity of spirit ? "

VAJUR VEDA

" The soul is the assemblage of the Gods. The universe rests in the Supreme Soul. It is the soul that accomplishes the series of acts emanating from animate beings. So the man who recognises the Supreme Soul as present in his own soul, understands that it is his duty to be kind and true to all."

MANU, 5, 12

It has been rather the habit of those who have made ethics a special study, to speak of it as an exact science, and to put it on the same plane as physics, and in contradistinction to theology. It is impossible to know the things of God, if, indeed, there be a God, and reasoners say, therefore, let us confine ourselves to the things of man. Let us study and conform to the laws of right action, and not waste precious time in idle speculation about what always must be, as it always has been — the Unknowable. We can have no proof of a future life, therefore let us not raise our eyes above the present one, content to do the best we can, without hope of any reward, even that of another existence with prolonged opportunities of growth. But, unfortunately, there seems to be an element in human nature that demands sustenance, that asks whence are we to derive the motive power of this virtue ? to which the Positivists answer, in the worship of humanity, and the students of ethics, in devotion to the Ideal Good. But the question itself seems to give us the clue to the weak point in their system. While denying the necessity of something outside of ethics, they tacitly acknowledge its existence. No matter how strong our desire to confine ourselves to the realm of realities, to argue only about things that can be proved, to deal only with the facts of life, there seems to be one stubborn factor in the case that we cannot get rid of — the demand of human nature for something above human nature — the cry of the soul for [Page 15] something to satisfy that hunger within it which cannot be fed by the things that fulfil the demands of the intellect and the senses. We may call the Ideal Good if we choose, but, after all, what is the Ideal Good but another name for the Divine ?

"Light intellectual replete with love,  
Love of true good replete with ecstasy."

Dante

The final basis of action, to give us even intellectual satisfaction, must surely be an immovable one. We must have for our starting-point something that cannot change with the point of view of the observer; something that we can call the Absolute. But can ethics alone furnish us with such a standpoint, being in

themselves so very uncertain a quantity, and so dependant upon the general characteristics of the age and race to which they belong? The ethics of the Hebrews were not the ethics of the Greeks, nor are the ethics of the Corsican peasant of today, for instance, with his relentless *vendetta* — the unceasing obligation in a family to avenge by murder, through endless, generations, the murder of an ancestor — our ethics. That vindictive Corsican would be as secure in his sense of right as we are in the conviction that he is wrong. Nor can we take refuge in an assurance that his intellectual inferiority is the sole cause of his perverted morals, for we cannot deny that great intellectual development may co-exist with great wickedness, and the purest morality with a very low range of intellect. The Borgias were monsters of wickedness, but they were never accused of a lack of intelligence. The village priest, brought up in the bosom of superstition, half-nourished, half-educated, all-unconscious of any other world than the narrow circle of his own duties, and quite incapable of formulating a theory of ethics, may yet lead the most heroic and Christ-like of lives. Nor is the intellectual assent to a moral law sufficient; it must take a deeper hold upon our being than intellectual assent before it can pass into action. For, after all, every theory of ethics ever formulated must come back in the last analysis to that final court of appeal that we are in the habit of calling the moral consciousness, that Christians would speak of as the voice of God in the soul, that the Theosophists call the higher Self, that *something* within which we recognise as ourselves and yet higher than ourselves, and from whose dread decisions there is no escape. When, in the great crises of our inward life, we are brought face to face with this Power, I think we realize that it is no mere intellectual abstraction, and that to call it the Ideal Good is like describing the tempest-tossed ocean in all the majesty of its rage as "a body of water encompassing the principal divisions of the earth".

If then we feel that even the science of ethics has its foundation in the spiritual consciousness of man, if we are forced to recognise the existence of another part of our being than the body and the mind, if we are driven [Page 16] by the study of self to conclude that within the depths of that self lies a greater power than the intellect, that can apprehend where the intellect can only grope, and *know* where the intellect can only reason, and which, by its very demand for satisfaction, proves that there is that by which it can be satisfied. Why not begin at the other end, and found our system of ethics upon a spiritual rather than an intellectual basis? To a certain class of minds, I am aware, this would not appeal; beyond the intellectual faculties they recognise nothing, but because there are also those who can get nothing from music beyond a more or less agreeable noise, are we therefore to conclude that Beethoven and Bach were the victims of delusion, as well as all those whom their harmonies have lifted to celestial heights? Certainly, as the history of the world's religions will attest, to a large portion of mankind the spiritual nature is the most real thing they know, the inner self the one thing of whose existence they are certain, and therefore it has occurred to me that it would be interesting to oppose to the ethics formulated upon a virtual denial of that spiritual nature a system of ethics which, on the contrary, takes the spiritual nature as its basis. But I would premise that the ethics of Theosophy make no pretensions to novelty, nor do they assert to themselves any superiority over Christianity or any other creed. Indeed, Theosophists maintain that the teachings of Christ, rightly interpreted, contain the purest system of morality possible. The Brahmin Mohini Chatterji, in his translation of the "Bhagavad Gîtâ", continually points out the identity of its teachings with those of the Bible, and says, indeed, that it is not possible to doubt that the Brahmin and the Christian are fellow-voyagers. "The Brahmanical sages have taught with great emphasis that the easiest road to perfect purity is love of God and love of His creatures. Does Christianity teach anything else?" he asks. Unfortunately the teachings of the New Testament have been misunderstood and corrupted by transcribers and translators, and hopelessly perverted by prejudiced commentators, while a third impediment to their comprehension arises from the constant iteration of their words in our childish or careless ears, so that here indeed, familiarity has bred contempt. As Dr. Holmes has so forcibly said, we need to have the words of sacred books *depolarised*. This is why new formulas have such a hold upon

the popular mind, and why men so eagerly follow an old truth in a new dress. It is useless to say "there is nothing new in that statement, the same idea has been expressed hundreds of times", — the jaded thought feels itself spurred by the fresh form into which that old truth has been cast, and answers to the touch of a novel stimulus.

The Theosophists then, disclaim all pretensions to novelty. In fact they claim as their basis the eternal verities underlying all religions, and they necessarily begin their system from within instead of from without. In the "Life of Madame Guion", written by herself, she tells us that having [Page 17] found it impossible to derive any benefit from prayer, she applied to a very religious Franciscan, who instantly removed all her difficulties by saying to her: "It is, Madam, because you seek *without* what you have within. Accustom yourself to seek God in your heart, and you will there find Him". It was the same thought that was expressed in the Laws of Manu so many centuries before, at the beginning of this paper: "The man who recognises the Supreme Soul as present in his own soul understands that it is his duty to be kind and true to all."

"To him who is conscious of the True Self (within himself)", says the *Mundaka Upanishad*, "all desires vanish even here on earth. That Self cannot be gained by the Veda, nor by understanding, nor by much learning. . . But if a wise man strives after it by strength, earnestness, and right meditation . . . his deeds and his self, with all his knowledge, become all one in the highest Imperishable".

In an article in the *Dublin University Review* for May, 1886, Mohini sums up "the teachings of Theosophy from the standpoint of common-sense" in these words :

1. "That there is a principle of consciousness in man which is immortal.
2. "That this principle is manifested in successive incarnations on earth.
3. "That the experiences of the different incarnations are strictly governed by the law of causation.
4. "That as each individual man is the result of a distinct causal necessity in nature, it is not wise for one man to dominate the life and action of another, no matter what their relative development may be. On the other hand, it is of paramount importance that each individual should ceaselessly work for the attainment of the highest ideal that he is capable of conceiving. . . .
5. "That for the above reasons it is wise and just to practise the most ungrudging toleration towards all our fellow-creatures.
6. "That as absolute unity of all nature exists for ever, all self-centred actions are bound to end in pain to the actor on account of their opposition to this fact. The foundation of morals must therefore lie in the feeling of the Universal Brotherhood of Man.

7. " That the harmony of the unit with the whole is the only condition which can remove all pain, and as each individual represents a distinct causal operation of nature, this harmony is attainable only through the individual's own exertions."

Theosophy believes that truth is the result of real experience, and does not consist in the transfer of intellectual symbols from one person to another. To speak about truth is one thing, and to perceive it is quite a different process. As Emerson says: "We know truth *when we see it*, [Page 18] from opinion, as we know when we are awake that we are awake". " Hence, individual consciousness", says Mohini, "is consistently upheld as the only criterion of truth, but this consciousness derives material help in its development and expansion by the study of the experiences of others. Thus, Theosophy teaches that *personal exertion is the only means by which progress can be achieved*. But in the effort for growth, the ultimate unity of consciousness must not be ignored. Individuals are not distinct crystals, placed side by side, but the varied manifestations of one unchanging universal consciousness. As light from one single source produces the appearance of different lights by reflection from a number of surfaces, so this universal consciousness, remaining itself unchanged, produces endless individualities, which in the course of their evolution reach perfection by recognising this essential unity. According to Theosophical thinkers, this doctrine forms the fundamental truth upon which all religions are based; it is the final consummation of all philosophical thought, and the crowning experience of all practical mysticism. The search for this truth, and the practical realisation of it, are not considered as mere gratification of intellectual curiosity, but as the very *summum bonum* of evolutionary progress. It is the Nirvâna of the Buddhists, the Moksha of the Brahmins, and not very different from the Beatific Vision of the Christians. Nirvana is by no means the annihilation of consciousness, but its rest in the infinite plenitude of being".

Theosophy recognises, in the various systems of religion, the various attempts, modified by special causes, to embody spiritual truth, but it also recognises that the different symbologies of words and emblems that are used to represent that truth, being "inwardly digested" and assimilated by different organisms, partake of the differences of the individual, and as no two individuals can be absolutely identical, neither can their beliefs be the same, therefore it is an uncompromising supporter of the freedom of the individual conscience. The fundamental ideas of Theosophy, as expounded by some of their principal writers, are briefly these: That the existence of matter without relation to a conscious Knower has never been experienced. Therefore matter and consciousness are both eternal, or neither. That there is in nature a principle of consciousness whose units are not atoms but individualities, and as the principle is eternal its units must be so also. For the ocean cannot be salt unless the quality of saltiness inhere in every one of its drops. Theosophy, for these, among other reasons, holds against Materialism that the individuality in man is immortal. And it must be conceded that a scheme of the universe which considers the existence of the individual as prepared and led up to for thousands of years, to endure only for the paltry span of human life and then be extinguished, is as revolting to common-sense as one which holds that a man's status for all [Page 19] eternity may be determined by his religious attitude during his last moments, or still worse, by that "Divine caprice" which is embodied in the doctrine of predestination.

From the indestructibility of individual consciousness, and its relations to matter, two important deductions follow. First, that this relation, which is perpetually changing, changes according to a definite

law. ... What is *now* is not wholly unrelated to what was before. By the application of this law of causation to our being, it follows that the experience of pleasure and pain in the present must be the necessary consequences of causes generated in the past. . . . Whatever you sow the same you reap, whether you are conscious of the sowing or not. The little child who strays unawares into an atmosphere of typhus, and breathes in its deadly germs, is not protected by its unconsciousness of evil from the fatal results of that contact, nor can the fact of forgetfulness of the cause interfere with the necessary effect. Because we have forgotten the sins against the laws of health that we committed in our youth, we do not, therefore, go scot-free of their results in after years, and what is true of one personality should be equally true of many. This law of causation thus applied to personal experience of suffering and enjoyment is called the Law of Karma.

If the individual consciousness is immortal, and its experiences are governed by the Law of Karma, then it follows that so long as all causes capable of producing effects on the present plane of life are not exhausted, and the generation of similar causes is not stopped, the individual consciousness will remain connected with the experience of earthly existence. "The will to live", as Schopenhauer calls it (an idea identical with the Buddhist *tanha*, or unsatisfied desire for existence), continually brings back the ego to the shifting phantasmagoria of earthly life, the *individuality* or higher self, persisting, though the *personality* in which it is embodied, continually changes, until its physical tendencies and inclinations being entirely purged away, it is no longer under the necessity of re-incarnation. And moreover, the idea of a future *spiritual* state, in which our good and evil deeds shall be rewarded and punished, is held by Theosophists to be founded on an injustice, for the sins done in the body can only be properly expiated in the body, and therefore absolute justice demands that the entity should return to physical life, in order that it may work out its salvation by climbing step by step the long ladder of existence.

But we must take note of the distinction between *individuality* and *personality*. The unit of consciousness, the individuality, persists, the personality changes. The larva of the dragon-fly crawls, behind a hideous mask, at the bottom of the brook; its element is water; its dry husk hangs upon a twig motionless and inert as the earth to which it belongs, until, in [Page 20] the fulness of time, "an inner impulse rends the veil", and it emerges a winged creature of the air —

"Through crofts and pastures wet with dew,  
A living flash of light he flew."

In one sense each personality is a new being, in another it is not. "During this life", says the Buddhist Catechism, "the personality constantly changes, and while the man A. B. of forty is identical as regards individuality with the youth A. B. of eighteen, yet by the continual waste of his body, and change of mind and character, he is a different being. Nevertheless the man in his old age justly reaps the reward or suffering consequent upon his thoughts and actions at every previous stage of his life. So the new being of a re-birth, being the same individuality as before, but with a changed form or new personality, justly reaps the consequences of his actions and thoughts in the previous existence". And this doctrine of re-incarnation has been taught by all the religions of the world, Christianity not excepted. In the 11th chapter of Matthew, Jesus, in speaking to his disciples of John the Baptist, says: "If ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear". And in the 17th chapter he says: "Elias is come already, and they knew him not . . . Then his disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist". And in the 9th chapter of Mark, the disciples ask about a man born blind, " Did this man sin, or his parents, that he was born blind ? " And in the Wisdom of Solomon, viii., 20, we read, " Being good, I came into a body undefiled".

From these leading ideas of the unity of spirit, the working of the law of Karma, and the gradual progress of the individual to complete re-union with the Divine, it is easy to see that the ethics of Theosophy demand not only moral but spiritual cultivation as our duty to ourselves, and the strictest altruism as regards our brother man.

And in the first place, as regards duty to ourselves, the utmost purity of motive is required. "Desire to sow no seed for your own harvesting", we are told, "desire only to sow that seed, the fruit of which shall feed the world."

"Enough if something from our hand have power  
To live and move, and serve the future hour."

WORDSWORTH.

Not even the desire for personal purity is allowed as a motive for right action, as it has its root in self-regard, and tends to set one apart from his fellows. Hence asceticism in every form is most strenuously discouraged. The good must be done solely for its own sake, not that our own virtue may be increased, the result to ourselves must not be thought of, only the doing of the right thing; beyond that we are not to look. Ambition, the desire to rise above one's fellows, is the first sin to be rooted out of the soul. It is the simplest form of looking for reward.[Page 21]

"Grow as the flower grows", says *Light on the Path*, "unconsciously, but eagerly anxious to open its soul to the air. So must you press forward to open your soul to the eternal. But it must be the eternal that draws forth your strength and beauty, not desire of growth. For, in the one case, you develop in the luxuriance of purity; in the other, you harden by the forcible passion for personal stature."

As to the *process* of spiritual development, Theosophy teaches that in order to secure the supremacy of the spiritual element in our nature, it must be cultivated as our other faculties are cultivated, for though potentially existing in all, it may become atrophied for want of exercise, as a limb shrinks that is not used, or a faculty of the mind decays if not employed. It tells us that this process "is entirely *within* the individual himself, the motive, the effort, the result, being strictly personal. That, however personal and interior, this process is not unaided, being possible, in fact, only through close communion with the Supreme Source of all strength". That it consists "in the eradication of selfishness in all forms, and the cultivation of broad, generous sympathy in, and effort for, the good of others; in the cultivation of the inner spiritual man by meditation, and communion with the Divine; in the control and subordination of the physical nature and desires; and in the careful performance of every duty belonging to one's station in life, without desire for reward, leaving the results to Divine law. That while the above is incumbent on, and practicable by, all religiously-disposed men, a yet higher plane of spiritual attainment is conditioned upon a specific course of training, physical, intellectual, and spiritual, by which the internal faculties are first aroused and then developed".

It will be seen that Theosophy, like Christianity, does not consider prayer as "a waste of time", that is, of course, prayer not in the limited and concrete sense of a petition to a personal Deity for some personal

advantage, but in the sense of abstraction from the things of sense in contemplation of the things that are divine, the unfolding of those wings of the soul that enable it to soar into the heavens — those heavens, be it remembered, that are not above us, but within.

But we are also warned that spiritual development cannot be sought by any one path. "To each temperament there is one road which seems the most desirable. But the way is not found by devotion alone, by religious contemplation alone, by ardent progress, by self-sacrificing labour, by studious observation of life. . . . All steps are necessary to make up the ladder. The whole nature of man must be used wisely by the one who desires to enter the way".

We are shown then that our duty to ourself consists in self-purification, and in the cultivation of our spiritual nature. And in the purification of our being from sin, it is not enough, as Jesus also taught, to repress the [Page 22] outward act, we must purge ourselves first from the inward desire; To refrain from striking a blow while the whole soul is seething with anger, is of no use, except to the object of our rage — we must learn not to *feel* anger. Nor does it profit us to deny ourselves the gratification of any passion, if we are all the while hungering and thirsting for that gratification — it is the *spirit* that must be made pure. So, too, a morbid sense of remorse for past sins is discouraged; true repentance lies in doing better, but the soul that dwells upon the thought of evil insensibly absorbs something of its atmosphere. Nor is it enough to deny ourselves indulgence in sorrow; we must learn that nothing in this illusory life is worthy of regret. We must strive for that attitude of mind described in the verse I have quoted from the "Yajur Veda": — "In him who knows that all spiritual beings are the same in kind with the Supreme Spirit, what room can there be for delusion of mind, and what room for sorrow when he reflects upon the identity of spirit."

To a system of ethics, founded upon the conception of all spirit as part of one great whole, of each individuality as one drop in the ocean of Infinite Being, the idea of the Universal Brotherhood of Man becomes a living truth, and with the duty of right *action* towards one's neighbour, the duties of right speech and right thought are also strenuously insisted upon. Not only are we warned against ambition, or the desire to be better than our fellows, as a sin against ourselves, but we are next enjoined to "kill out all sense of separateness", not to fancy that we can stand aside from the bad man or the foolish man, but to realize that the sin and shame of the world are our sin and shame, that the soiled garments we shrink from touching may have been ours yesterday, and may be ours tomorrow". It was an echo of the same thought that prompted John Bunyan to say, when he saw a notorious criminal led to execution, " But for the grace of God, there goes John Bunyan". The same authority just quoted, *The Light on the Path*, says: — "Let the darkness within you help you to understand the helplessness of those who have seen no light — whose souls are in profound gloom. Blame them not. Shrink not from them, but try to lift a little of the heavy Karma of the world; give your aid to the few strong hands that hold back the powers of darkness from obtaining complete victory. Then, do you enter into a partnership of joy, which brings, indeed, terrible toil and profound sadness, but also a great and ever-increasing delight. . . . Underneath all life is the strong current that cannot be checked: the great waters are there in reality. Find them, and you will perceive that none, not the most wretched of creatures but is a part of that life, however he blinds himself to the fact, and build up for himself a phantasmal outer form of horror. In that sense it is that I say to you: All those beings among whom you struggle on are fragments of the Divine".

" He who does not feel irresistibly impelled to serve the race", says [Page 23] another authority, "whether he himself fail or not (in his own aim) is bound fast by his own personality, and cannot progress until he has learned that *the race is himself*, and not that body that he now occupies. . . ." And again, " in our view, the highest aspirations for the welfare of humanity become tainted with selfishness, if in the mind of the philanthropist there lurk the shadow of a desire for self-benefit or a tendency to do injustice, even when these exist unconsciously to himself". And once more, " He who does not practise altruism ; he who is not prepared to share his last morsel with a weaker or poorer than himself; he who neglects to help his brother man, of whatever race, nation or creed, whenever and wherever he meets suffering, and who turns a deaf ear to the cry of human misery; he who hears an innocent person slandered, whether a brother Theosophist or not, and does not undertake his defence as he would undertake his own — is no Theosophist."

Of course, in this brief sketch of the ethics of Theosophy, I have tried to confine myself to the broadest general statements, and to present as far as possible those ideas most closely connected with morality. The metaphysical basis upon which we found our right action is of comparatively little consequence to that right action itself, but when a system of ethics is based upon a portion of our nature that is utterly ignored by many students of the subject, it becomes worth while to examine the grounds upon which such a system is founded. To the race, as far as the practical workings of the two systems are concerned, the result in material improvement might be the same, but it is to the individual that Theosophy presents, it seems to me, an advantage over ethical culture. " What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul ?" It satisfied a demand of many natures that mere morality can never satisfy, for, while denying the existence of a personal God, by recognizing the spiritual element that makes man one with the Unknown Source of all life, it satisfies the religious instinct, and opens wide the windows of the soul to admit the Light of the World. By making the individual reason the test of truth, and refusing to recognize as such anything that does not appeal to the individual's own consciousness, no matter by whom the dogma may be formulated, it leaves the soul free as any absolute negation can make it, and by taking for its standard a rigorous self-denial, in the widest sense of the word, it enforces the purest morality as regards others. In a paper dealing professedly with the ethics of the Theosophists, there is no need to touch upon their more metaphysical, religious, and scientific ideas, but I would simply say that it is upon the ethics of the system that the great stress is laid by all the leading members of their body, and that such a book as Mr. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, for instance, is considered to be a sort of symbolic treatment of subjects too abstract for the ordinary mind to grasp, and devised for the express purpose (which it has admirably served) [Page 24] of awaking a general interest in the Oriental wisdom, Few of us are equal, without a good deal of preliminary training in philosophy, to the keen subtleties, the Upanishads, that "fine flower" of Oriental thought, nor has our less metaphysical race ever evolved a language capable of expressing those delicate shades of meaning for which the Hindoos have such a very rich and precise vocabulary. But we can appreciate the value of a religion without other dogma than that taught by Jesus when he said, "The kingdom of heaven is within you", and certainly that one spiritual truth is the basis alike of Oriental wisdom, Christian mysticism, and Sufi poetry. This Divine is one with our own souls, and in him who knows and feels that, what room indeed can there be "for delusion of mind, and what room for sorrow ?"

Faridud-din Attar, a Sufi poet, who described the seven stages in the road leading to union with the Divine Essence, concluded thus: "Last stage of all is the Valley of Annihilation of self, the seventh and supreme degree which no human words can describe. There is the great ocean of Divine Love. The



world present and the world to come are but as figures reflected in it, and as it rises and falls, how can they remain ? He who plunges in that sea and is lost in it, finds perfect peace."

This intimate union with the Divine is the constant theme of Oriental writers, and was beautifully suggested by Jellaluddin, another of the Sufi poets, in a parable that may be rendered into English verse thus: — [Published in the "Path", July 1887]

" At the Beloved's door a timid knock was heard :  
And a voice came from within, sweeter than morning bird,  
Softer than silver drops that from plashing fountains fall,  
' Who is there ?' — and the stillness stirred  
For a moment, and that was all.

"And the lover who stood without, eager and full of fear,  
Answered the Silver Voice — ' It is I who am waiting here,  
Open then, my Beloved, open the door to me !'  
But he heard the response ring clear —  
' This House will not hold Me and Thee !'

" And the door remained fast shut, and the lover went away  
Far into the desert's depths, to wait, and fast, and pray;  
To dwell in the tents of Sorrow, and drink of the cup of Grief:  
And Solitude taught him each day,  
And Silence brought him relief.

" And after a year he returned, and knocked at the close-shut door,  
And he heard the Beloved's voice as it answered him once more;  
Who is there ?' — and softer than dew, or the velvety rose-leaf's fall,  
And low as when angels adore,  
He said — 'Tis Thyself that doth call!'

" And his heart stood still with fear, and his eager eyes were dim;  
Then tho' the silent night rang the sound of a marriage hymn;  
And the bolts and bars flew back, and the door was opened wide,  
And fair on the threshold's rim  
Stood his Beloved, his Bride ! "