

Conduct

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CONDUCT, it has been said by one of the ablest of living English writers, makes up at least three-fourths of life. Hence it is supremely important that we should find some criterion by which our conduct may be ordered to the best advantage. Though in different parts of the globe there are considerable differences of opinion in the estimation of the heinousness of similar crimes, we find on the whole a universal prevalence of similar ideas of right and wrong. The difference is not so much in the ideas themselves or in their nature as in the reasons on which those ideas are founded. A large portion of mankind consider that they are bound to act in certain ways, because they would otherwise displease their deity, and in that case would be visited with punishment. Others uphold a system of morality and abide by it on the ground that all are bound to act in such a manner as to promote the greatest good of the greatest number. There is, however, a third way of arriving at the foundation of a sound system of morality which seems to possess the further recommendation that it is contained in the very nature of things. For if we admit the action of one life governed by one law, working throughout the universe, then what we call right must be simply action in accordance with that law, and what we call wrong must be action in opposition to it. [Page 23]

The main characteristic of the universal law is that under its operation all things tend to reach out towards a higher development, as does also the universe itself. Hence action in accordance with that law will be action that will serve to promote our higher development, and not such as will tend to hinder it by the indulgence of the lower or animal nature.

Again, by treating others with brotherly kindness, we shall help on their development also, and it is our plain duty to do this if we are to follow the dictates of the universal law, for if we act in a different manner, if by considering our own interests alone and endeavouring to promote them at the expense of others, by selfish action, then we act against the law which makes for the development of the whole as well as of every part, and we shall infallibly be crushed by the forces of nature. Once admit the real intrinsic unity of the universe, and what has just been said must follow as a natural corollary.

Thought governs action, and to arrive at right conduct right thought must be cultivated. The mind must be restrained and its workings must be made to proceed in the most spiritual direction that we are capable of conceiving. We must act not from intellectual impulse merely, but in accordance with our highest intellectual conceptions of the truth. It is here that an acquaintance with the esoteric doctrine or wisdom-religion is seen to have a definite practical value. Its great practical recommendation is that it furnishes us with a comprehensive theory of life as a whole, and so gives us a rational ground on which to order our conduct. Moreover it gives a unity to the whole course of our life, so that we are able to live for a definite end and to make progress that is real and lasting.

The two main passions by which man is governed are those of love and hatred. The former makes for unity, the latter for separation and destruction.

The doctrine of reïncarnation follows the acceptance of the doctrine of human perfectibility, for if this perfectibility is a fact, and it is also a fact that it has to be worked out by evolutionary development, then we can conceive no other way in which this result can be brought about. Higher development in some state of existence other than that of our present earth life, cannot produce the same effects, and if we know that a portion at least of our development must inevitably be worked out on earth, then, unless we admit that there is such a thing as partial development only, the whole remaining portion must in like manner be worked out on earth. Unless this be so, one of two things must happen. Either this life must be final, in which case our best course would be surely to please ourselves only at whatever cost, or else in the higher spheres, if their existence be admitted, there will be nothing but confusion.

There are some who consider that human immortality is confined to the succession of life on earth, and that we shall live again in our descendants, and thus only. If death immediately followed the production of offspring, there would be some show of reason in this hypothesis, for it might be argued that the parents dying, left their essential selves in their children, endowing them by the law of heredity with the result of their experience, and so on. But as a matter of fact this is not what actually does happen. For the most part men and women live some years after they have given birth to children. Hence the question arises, what becomes of the experience gained by a man after his paternity ? Are we to suppose that it all perishes with the physical body ? Has all the energy generated by [Page 24] unfulfilled aspirations, and that was latent in faculties that never had a chance of full fruition, no further existence ? Unless we accept the hypothesis of reïncarnation there does not seem to be any satisfactory answer to this question.

The accumulation of experience, the formation of the real man, goes on until the day of his death, or at least as long as his faculties remain unimpaired. If it is true that any further development is to take place, that development must start from the stage attained during the whole life, and not merely from a point reached some years before death.

Again, if this development is to take place, it is evident that the starting-point must be, as it were, a quintessence of the whole life of the man, further progress can only be possible as an addition to what has been *completely* accomplished; hence it is that a state of rest becomes in the majority of cases a necessary part of human development, in order to get rid of the energy set up by unfulfilled desire and the like.