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Ethics

THE ETHICS OF THE SECRET DOCTRINE

The Blavatsky Lecture
1935

BY
SIDNEY RANSOM



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Society in England at Conway Hall, London,
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FOREWORD

For some years now it has been the custom to provide a Blavatsky lecture at the annual Convention of the English as well as of other Sections of The Theosophical Society. It is most fitting and proper that regular opportunities should thus be introduced for collective thought on one or more aspects of Madame Blavatsky's life-work and teachings of the Secret Doctrine, or Theosophy.

The "Secret Doctrine" to which our title refers is not to be found in its completeness in any one of her books. "From the beginning of man's inheritance," she writes, "from the first appearance of the architects of the globe he lives on, the unrevealed Deity was recognised . . . " Long, long is the line of noble Theosophists who have revealed the Secret Doctrine, but it is, of course, very specially with Madame Blavatsky's great contribution that we deal in this lecture. The Secret Doctrine of the ages is outlined in her books, so far as such can be outlined, yet she reminded us that only "a few" of the fundamental truths can yet see the light; but scattered through all of them will be found many hints, many vistas, of the ethics of this Secret Doctrine, though very naturally we expect primarily to find most of them in the great book that bears this name.

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This is the teaching, this the counsel, this the hidden wisdom, this the instruction, this verily should be carried out.

TAITTIRIYOPANISHAD.

In common with all other sciences Ethics is studied and expounded by both the ill-equipped and the expert. Only to the few is it given to see beyond the limits of the outlook of their own day, to impress upon the thought of Time the hall-mark of Eternity. H. P. Blavatsky was one of these. A qualified knower of the Hidden Wisdom, she saw with unerring intuition and uncompromising directness the way to that Bliss which is ever at the heart of things and which "becomes our universe" only as we give ourselves selflessly to the obeying of its laws.

H.P.B. saw in Ethics the right out-working of human relationships, to the end that harmony and happiness might ensue. She helped humanity to rediscover the truth that Right Living, or Ethics, implies an ever wider and wider manifestation of Beauty, Love, and Joy. This manifestation, she saw, is necessarily a progressive one, since man himself is evolving and every stage of his becoming has its appropriate Rightness, or

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Ethics. She demonstrated the falsity of the standards which encourage human beings to act as though they were "strangers and foreigners" to one another and showed that right Ethics proved us all to be "fellow-citizens."

Ethics intimately concerns the knowledge of environment. In a restricted sense Ethics consists in that set of rules of conduct by following which man is enabled to fit into his environment with the least possible inconvenience. By derivation Ethics refers to qualities of character (commonly classified as virtues and vices) as distinct from intellect. A much wider meaning, however, is where Ethics is seen as including all activities on any plane which make for man's good and happiness. Again, the happiness of man is linked with the good of the Universe, and so the subject-matter of Ethics has no limits. In a much narrower sense the phrase "private ethics" has been used, carrying with it the palpable error that there can be any kind of ethics separate from and unrelated to those of the rest of the world. The Latin equivalent of the word *ethics* gives us our word *morals*, which also has been restricted in modern usage, sometimes to the definitely unmoral.

H.P.B. was not greatly concerned with the ordinary comforts or discomforts of conventional life. She was concerned primarily with that essential Truth-of-Things which makes man free. To the Secret Doctrine environment means something much vaster and statelier than any local surrounding of race or country. It is the

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ethics of the Whole, not of the part only, which is studied—the Whole, with all its infinitude of linkings, relationships, and correspondences. The Secret Doctrine extends the meaning of environment to the widest boundary. Not merely is this planet our environment, not even this solar system. To whatever limits we can go before our particular Ring-Pass-Not is reached, *that* is our environment; and Ethics implies, ultimately and for each one of us, a knowledge of every shade of influence existing within that Ring-Pass-Not. How vast, then, is the sphere of Ethics according to the Secret Doctrine! The undeveloped among mankind have neither ability nor need to reckon with subtler influences and subtler relationships, but the more sensitive and evolved must take into account ever deeper and wider ranges. Ultimately, man will learn and know that he is rooted in the Eternal, and that not even his present Ring-Pass-Not is the limit of either his responsibility or his opportunity.

We might define Ethics as the exact knowledge of Right Conduct. It has sometimes been said that Right Conduct is relative, but this is not so. For a particular being, existing in a particular environment and under a particular set of conditions, there would be only one Right Conduct. But how infinitely varied are both conditions and the types of beings experiencing those conditions! Even if conditions could be exactly duplicated Right Conduct must vary for different people, because they themselves are different, and this prevents any hard-and-fast ruling with regard to

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Right Conduct. To define is often to invite heresy. An exact science, such as Ethics, is not and cannot be relative. But the *applications* of Ethics can be and are infinitely relative. If a set of circumstances could be repeated for a certain person in twelve months' time his reactions would be different, because he would have shifted his own position in the interval, and so his sense of rightness would have changed, and with it his relationship to the whole situation. Both man and the universe are in a state of ever-becoming. That at which we are looking changes before our observation is completed, and we ourselves are changed on all levels of our being during and through that observation. Continual reaction entails continual readjustment.

Purity to H.P.B. was Right Conduct. But what a purity was hers! It bore no narrow meanings; narrow meanings were unknown to H.P.B. Hers was a purity of single-heartedness, of uttermost self-dedication to the service of that Power of whose working in her own life and in the universe she was aware. To her Ethics implied being completely in tune with that Power. Her life was governed by the single purpose of keeping pure and unobstructed the channel between herself and That, and of her, because of this, the text could be quoted, "the pure in heart shall see God."

Right Conduct requires the establishing of proper and harmonious relationships with all other beings in our environment. A certain minimum set of rules is nowadays more or less

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agreed upon in all civilized countries, though the different racial outlooks are still sufficiently marked to provide ample material for the cartoonist and the psychologist. The differences between, say, Melbourne, London, and New York are slight as regards the nature and quality of the reactions to human problems. A certain broad Rightness would hold good for similar sets of circumstances in all three localities. Yet, with an entirely different type of civilization, our ideas of Rightness would need to be severely modified, if not changed altogether. It is, for instance, now commonly considered right to respect another person's ownership of property. Such an agreed code of ethics is convenient and we quickly penalise anyone not subscribing to it. While retaining such a code, it will necessarily be wrong conduct for any person, or group of persons, to appropriate anything belonging to someone else—whether it is an individual's umbrella, a nation's land, or anything that lies between or beyond these two extremes. That misappropriation of all kinds has frequently received high sanction alters things not one whit. "Keep ye clear to each his own," is the law.

If, however, mankind could win to that much higher level of consciousness where the desire to acquire and retain personal possessions is lost, where happiness and growth are known to exist in giving and in the living of an impersonal and disinterested life, where all sense of resentment and separateness drops away—in such a civilisation of high status, in tune with the Divine

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Power at work in the universe, such words as "*theft*" and "*misappropriation*" would necessarily lose their present meaning. There being no exclusive "mine" and "thine" in such matters, it would in such a civilisation be natural, and therefore right, for anyone needing, say, an umbrella, to employ the first unused umbrella that could be found, no matter to whom it "belonged." In such circumstances, how simplified would be social and domestic life! How simplified, too, would become the problems of Distribution and Consumption! But of course the using of another person's "umbrella" would only be "right" where the user is completely willing that on a similar occasion his temporary property would shift to another relative owner. Pride in possession, like jealousy at its absence, would have disappeared, giving place to a sane open-handedness which held all things as at the service of all and found its chief delight in the joyous sharing and giving of all it had to share and to give. Even to-day there are men and women who have lost the sense of possessiveness. Their actions are not generally seen rightly by the world, though the astounding generosity that characterises them is always apparent, as with H.P.B.

Many of our existing conventions and bye-laws are still probably "right," but of some the most that can be said is that they once were right. Theosophy, at any stage, is always the bridge from one interpretation of Rightness to the next. H.P.B. nobly trod that bridge, and in treading it

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she liberated humanity from many outworn impressions of rightness, pointing the way to that higher status of living in which a purity of the whole being inevitably opens the way to Bliss.

Ethics itself cannot be relative, because the basic principles remain the same eternally. The knowledge of those principles has always been available; our modern discoveries of them are but rediscoveries. Throughout the ages, an institution has existed whose function was, and is, the keeping intact of a perfect example of these Eternal Principles. This institution is called The Mysteries. Through both men and women, unfailingly, down the ages, it has afforded definite proofs of the Laws of God. "In the chaos of popular superstition," said Voltaire, "there existed an institution which has ever prevented man from falling into absolute barbarity, the Mysteries."

H.P.B. tells us that "the Aryans were the authors of the most perfect code of Ethics,"¹ and adds further, "neither the Lemurians nor the Lemuro-Atlantean Races had any religion in the common acceptance of the term, for they had no dogma, nor had they to believe in faith . . . No sooner had the mental eye of man been opened to understanding than the Third Race felt itself one with the ever-present, as also the ever-to-be-unknown and invisible, All, the One Universal Deity. Endowed with divine powers and feeling in himself, his *inner* God, each felt he was a Man-God in his nature, though an animal in his

¹ *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. ii, p. 264.

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physical self. The struggle between the two began from the very day they tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Wisdom.”¹

In *The Secret Doctrine* we are given a picture of Man as a whole. Man is shown as vastly older than any race or world, and his pilgrimage is seen to be an establishing of right, and therefore happy, relations between himself and his surroundings. It was H.P.B. who made us aware of many factors in man's surroundings which had hitherto been hidden, or occult, to us. A progressive, orderly, and organised pilgrimage was what she pointed out—a Pathway which, for all its vicissitudes, turnings, spirals, differences of view, led inevitably to one Goal. We see that as man evolves the network of legal restrictions and taboos surrounding him is simplified. At any one stage Right Ethics imply the right understanding of that stage, and with understanding the need for outer compulsion goes.

All Life is one. We need Rules of Conduct because we do not yet realise the fact of that Unity. What H.P.B. urged was the bringing of our Rules up to date, the making of them into an instrument not of the dying past but of the dawning future, that through them even to-day we might win to that Bliss which is our birthright. Every true pilgrim on the Path of Becoming knows that Right Ethics alone produces Right Happiness. Even the beginner soon learns that the only happiness worth aiming at is that which owes no dependence to outer objects. *Through* outer

¹ *The Secret Doctrine*, p. 284.

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objects, and *through* other people, one can reach out to happiness, but to confuse the temporary instrument with the Life which is employing that instrument is, perhaps, the greatest Ignorance, the greatest ignoring of the Real. Perfect happiness implies perfect harmonious relationships on every plane and carries with it a knowledge of Unity. With that knowledge goes ever the music and magic of Joy.

To H.P.B. came some of the leading thinkers of her day—scientists, philosophers, writers—and a rich mine of information was open to such as cared to take it. She showed that a thinker who disciplines himself, who is an ethical man, inevitably contacts occultism. She undoubtedly saved science from the pull of materialism and inspired many workers with the dignity and high purpose of their calling. Science, Philosophy, Art, Theology—these were not to be pursued as ends in themselves but as aspects of the SELF. Those around her who took her teaching seriously were liberated to a higher level of ethics. Prejudices slipped away; mere opinions and theories were seen in a wider perspective. The parables and formulæ which had constituted knowledge were now seen in their true symbolic significance. It was the Reality that was being symbolised that mattered, and this Reality was the one Self. In every department of thought H.P.B. showed where enervating and materialising influences had crept in, and she showed, constructively, how each department could be true to its beneficent calling.

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The cardinal principle behind all laws of Right Conduct is that there is Unity beneath the infinite variety of all Life's many manifestations. That is the fundamental Fact and only the man whose conduct is in accordance with that Fact is moral. We constantly ignore some important factor in our tabulating of rules for Right Conduct. Constantly we ignore that the SELF is one. Our legal rights as citizens of our country are theoretically based on justice, but are actually often almost comically one-sided ethics. The law will, for example, arbitrate between two parties as to the ownership of some animal, never considering that the animal also has certain rights. Happily, a good beginning has been made in Animal Welfare work, and this must in time lead to a much fuller and more general consideration for those whom H. G. Wells, recognising the oneness of Life, has humourously called "our poorer relations." A good beginning has also been made in allowing rights to "natives," although it is by no means so long ago as we could wish since European Powers gaily and periodically contested the ownership of "native" territory with little or no consideration for the rights and claims of the natives concerned.

How wonderfully H.P.B. interpreted the teaching of the Buddha! She showed that if we knew the SELF was one, we could not hurt another being, could not feel resentment. Hurting another creature, another person or another nation involves hurting ourselves. A man is only moral when his conduct besides hurting no

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one is such that it increases the well-being and happiness of those he contacts. As we are still evolving "unto the perfect man," we need Rules and Codes, but a constant watchfulness is also necessary to see that no outworn Rule is obstructing Life. Iconoclasts sometimes suggest that all rules and conventions are hindrances, but what the true iconoclast really urges us to do is to reshape and refashion our Rules, and so bring them into accord with the pattern of the higher status of Self-expression to which we have attained.

The science of Ethics comprises far more than mere national and social customs. Its purpose is the bringing about of Universal Happiness. H.P.B. gave due evaluation to national and social customs; she often, indeed, showed their occult meaning and significance; but to her Ethics implied a knowledge of the Self—a knowledge of that purity by which the Self is reflected in the self. The conflict sometimes seen in her arose from the fact that her realisation of the Self was far, far ahead of the rules and codes which bound her contemporaries. Such realisation is vital in any Teacher who offers precepts for Right Conduct, Right Feeling, and Right Thought. All right precepts are based upon that recognition, that realisation. With this knowledge of the Self goes also a knowledge of the means by which the *Jīvâtma* evolves from ignorance to wisdom, infancy to maturity, weakness to power. Religions and ceremonies have sometimes been described as "frozen thought." Rather are they

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—or can be—crystals of thought, flashing from many facets light and illumination. A knowledge of the Self and a knowledge of the Process of Becoming are behind the building of any true religious ceremony, any true precept. The wisdom of the Teacher gives a Rule which, if exactly followed, will lead us to a higher stage where, perhaps, a new Rule may be given us.

Of all the Rules as yet given to mankind are any so vibrant with meaning as those given by H.P.B. in *The Voice of the Silence*? Such Rules do not bind us. They release the Self into the self, release into the personality those qualities which are “from on high.” What higher code, for example, can we, as lovers of the race, have than this: “Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain, like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer’s eye”? In this Rule, however, a quality of impersonality is implied that must often seem too high to reach. Yet in such service there can be no desire for reward or recognition, no seeking after our own good. It must be the natural spontaneous expression of the friendliness, the love that is in us for all.

Bishop Leadbeater quotes a Master as having said that “the power which the disciple shall covet is that which will make him appear as nothing in the eyes of men.” Was not H.P.B. herself such a disciple? Her great contribution to Life is that she lived for the greater SELF. Her own personal self was fascinating, appealing and

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convincing. And we value it. Yet not for that do we—to quote an *Upanishad*—count her dear. Rather is she dear to us for the sake of the SELF, of whose majesty, omniscience and omnipotence, she was such a brilliant and single-minded exponent. H.P.B. could herself have mounted easily to popular recognition and influence. She fell to no such temptation. With us, however, the temptation lingers to limit the Message to the messenger, to forget that we honour H.P.B. most when we endeavour to tread the high path to which she pointed. We love her as one who relinquishes all recognition and reward so that the Message may be the better given. We but poorly show that love when we rigidly or too literally insist upon the verbal definitions she once chose to use. Too easily are we inclined to rest at some point which she once victoriously reached but now has passed beyond. Her true followers are those who continue with her on her journeying, not those who say “So far, and no farther.”

The Temptations, allegorically described in the New Testament, are not temptations that were concluded once and for all. Rather they pursued the Master right to the very end. He himself beautifully referred to His disciples as “ye are they who have continued with Me in my temptations.” So also with H.P.B. Her temptations also continued right to the very end, but also to the end continued her strength and her fearless self-sacrifice. Never did she fall into the temptation of following the lesser truth.

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Her Ethics were utterly impersonal, because she herself sought neither reward nor recognition. The only claim she recognised was that of the SELF, the only duty her duty to THAT and to "the orphan, Humanity." To her the SELF was all things, all things were in the SELF. Such was the tradition she left us. And we follow this tradition in The Theosophical Society when we give our attention to the understanding of "values," and cease to worry about appearances, the lack of public or private recognition. For us the temptation to follow a lesser truth often takes the form of a regret in the apparent non-success of the Society. So easily, we see, could it become a popular movement. But at what cost? The cost would be the relinquishing of H.P.B.'s Ethics, the relinquishing of our *dharmā* as bridge-builders between the SELF and the self, between the old standard of Right Conduct and the new.

H.P.B. had a vision of Rightness. To her Ethics was something cosmic and we need to expand our lungs to the uttermost would we breathe the air in which she was so at home. *The Secret Doctrine* is a word picture of a Cosmic Vision. Its technique alone may engage our admiration. We may study the canvas, the mixture of paint, the framework; but these are but the instruments H.P.B. employed to communicate the Vision. The mediocre artist may complain that you do not understand his art, when the truth is that he himself does not understand Life. The iconoclast who does no more than reject the ugly and the transitory is but an

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artist in the making. The true iconoclast, whether in art or literature or life, is only an iconoclast in order that he may the more readily and clearly bring forth and express the hidden beauty he sees. Such an artist, such an iconoclast, was H.P.B. She was supreme in that she understood LIFE. And being supreme, she could employ any form of art that momentarily suited her purpose. How idle are such words as *unconventionality* and *unorthodoxy* when used in connection with the greatest of all our conventionalists—the true conventionalist in that she followed the Ethics of LIFE! Very simply she quoted the Sanskrit verse: “Doing good to another is right; causing injury to another is wrong.” A child could understand that. But in *The Secret Doctrine* she traced out the processes of evolution—creation, preservation, and dissolution—traced out the elements in our physical and spiritual heredity and showed that all Nature proclaims the truth of the Ethics of that simple verse.

The quietus to dogmatism was given by H.P.B. herself. She was too big to wish that all men should agree with her presentations. She offered the best she had to give; she knew that it merited attention, but she encouraged people to use their own minds. The wise teacher welcomes a growing independence in his pupils, and that H.P.B. encouraged. The very essence of her teaching is that we must not lean on her as an authority. She encouraged freedom of expression by her example; she showed the way we might usefully

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travel, but showed also that each traveller must do his own travelling, form his own opinions, gain insight for himself. To-day, it is no longer fashionable to be dogmatic, but present day discoveries, such as Modernism in religion, are but the official lifting of bans which H.P.B. long ago lifted. Indeed, it is rather amusing to note the relative modernism of some modernists. Their unorthodoxy is still severely limited to quite well-defined orthodoxy! Our greatest Modernist, H.P.B., knew no boundaries, and in that wide space she saw Ethics as the Rules and Methods by which the SELF manifests. She had no contempt for the rites and ceremonies of any religion; on the contrary, she explained them and showed their inner value, but for herself the saying of Mazzini could be quoted: "The temple of the true believer is not the chapel of a sect; it is a vast Pantheon."

Because she knew it as the Rules and Methods by which the SELF manifests, Ethics could, to H.P.B., never be based upon external authority. Dean Inge has recently said that "authority is the method of immature pupils," but had the Dean said so in 1875, when H.P.B. was saying so, one wonders how long he would have remained a Dean! Most people, of course, still demand authority, still depend on dogma. Even to-day mankind as a whole likes to have its decisions made for it, its problems solved, its path pointed out, the road made easy. But those who begin to glimpse Ethics as did H.P.B., who see Right Conduct as the bridge across which the SELF

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flashes from the Invisible to the Visible, know that the Ethics to which H.P.B. attracts us is intimately related to the vocation and high calling of The Theosophical Society. That vocation, that high calling, is the establishing of a new set of values in the world. To assist in that is our privilege. We may think of it, if you will, as the ushering in of a new Race, a new Type. It is a call to the living of the Higher Life, to the establishing and maintaining of a status of living a degree higher than that usual in the world to-day. The opportunity is given to be pioneers in this matter—pioneers of actions that shall be nearer perfection and more accurate than hitherto; of feelings that shall be purer; thoughts that shall be truer. We have to try to live out in our persons, both as individuals and as members of a Society, what hereafter will become the normal way of living for all mankind. The Ethics of H.P.B. may still be the ethics of the future for the vast majority of men, but the aim of her whole work and destiny was to show us that that future has to be brought into the present. And who have so surely the duty and privilege of bringing it into the present as those who follow her, or walk with her on the path she treads? The great virtues of Truthfulness, Fearlessness, Steadfastness, Harmlessness and Patience—these are the divine qualities that must shine out, that we must manifest, unerringly, consistently, faithfully, purely. Let us brood on them, live them, manifest them. Let such become for us the standard of Right Conduct. And before we close this

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hour of thought on our great Teacher, listen once more to her declaration of the steps necessary to the reaching of the Highest, let us note the ordered sequence of those steps and remind ourselves anew that from the first and essential step of a clean life the way is open to us to climb upwards to the Temple of Divine Wisdom, where, liberated, untrammelled, we shall, like H.P.B., "know as we are known."

Hear, then, once more, her words:

"Behold the truth before you: a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect, an unveiled spiritual perception, a brotherliness for one's co-disciple, a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction, a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher, a willing obedience to the behests of TRUTH, once we have placed our confidence in, and believe that Teacher to be possessed of it: a courageous endurance of personal injustice, a brave declaration of principles, a valiant defence of those who are unjustly attacked, and a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection which the secret science (*Gupta Vidya*) depicts—these are the golden stairs up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom."

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