

**ETHICAL
ADDRESSES.
FOURTH SERIES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649254439

Ethical addresses. Fourth series by Various

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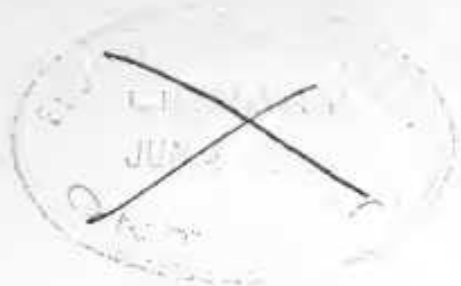
BY THE
LECTURERS OF ETHICAL SOCIETIES
AND OTHERS.



PHILADELPHIA :

S. BURNS WESTON, 1305 Arch Street.

1893.



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is born of the idealizing instincts of the mind—not the idealizing that dresses things up in fanciful shapes, but that, while seeing things as they are, conceives of what they might be.

By every true cause that wins, the world of reality is made so much fuller, richer, more perfect. Particularly is this true (perhaps here alone is it true) of that part of the world of reality we call human society. Over the world outside man we have little power. The birds of the air, the tribes of animals, the flowers of the field, fulfil their nature and attain their perfection of form unassisted by man. And our power over ourselves and the forms of human society is not absolutely unlimited; yet it is great. Our nature is not altogether set for us, it is in part made by us—and no one can tell beforehand how much may be made—*i. e.*, what are the real possibilities of our nature. Physically man can perhaps easily be classified; but the real man is spiritual, is made up, I mean, of thoughts, wishes, aspirations, struggles, actions—and it is not easy to draw lines and say what these may or may not be. Since man attains his end by thought, there would seem to be no necessary limits to his attainments save those of thought, and he would appear to have in him the possibility of an infinite progression. Perhaps, after all, man has no fixed nature, in the sense that a bird or a tree has, but can become anything that is good and great—can, give him time enough.

Now this thought of a perfected humanity—we may not be able to say just what perfection is, and yet we know the tendency thitherward,—is the goal, the ambition, the mainspring of ethics. Ethics, we familiarly

say, means human welfare, the greatest possible welfare, and I see not how we can stop short of the thought of a perfect development of man. In the abstract sense, indeed, ethics covers all our voluntary activity and applies to our dealings with the lower orders of creation as well; but in the nature of the case it is intercourse with our fellow-beings that makes up the greater part of human life and it is here that most of our duty lies. We are to think of what mankind may be and should be, and then work for it. We are to do everything that will help man and nothing that will harm him. It is but another more explicit way of putting this to say that we are to love all men, save in so far as they dehumanize themselves, and even then we are to love them so long as there is hope of reclaiming them; that we are to do justice to all men, giving them their respective dues; that we are to cheat no one, to defraud no one, to speak falsely to no one; that we should strengthen those who are weak and have pity on those who err; that we should remove needless temptations and surround men with all good influences; that we should try by all the forces of love and persuasion to convert those who have fallen into vicious and shameful ways; that we should spread light and knowledge and hope and cheer, so that all may attain something like a worthy human life on the earth. And most of us have special duties owing to our peculiar circumstances and situation in life. We are members of families, we live in communities, we have some special trade, calling or profession. For husbands and wives to be true to one another and to faithfully educate their children, for citizens to care for the public good as well as their own private interests, for

each one to follow faithfully his chosen task in life and do that one thing well—this, too, is human duty.

I have said ethics aims at a perfected humanity. And yet how far away, how vague, in a sense how unpractical such a thought seems! It is the duties that lie right before us, that arise in the relationships of life with which we are already familiar, which give an immediate point, a concrete, definite content that no one can mistake, to ethics.

Such is my general understanding of ethics. It includes a great aim and immediate definite duty. Or, to turn it round, it means immediate definite duty and a great aim—it includes not only the few rules we are all familiar with, but an enlarging circle of duty, enlarging as our knowledge advances and as our opportunities increase—and this enlargement has no limit till the goal of perfection, the actual universal humanization of man is reached.

Ethics is thus in its very nature a cause—for it represents an uncompleted ideal, something that in any perfection is still to be. We may of course study the ideal of human life, and the conditions of its attainment, simply to make things clear to ourselves; we may do so without a thought of what is to be done with the knowledge, whether by ourselves or anybody else. To the pure student or investigator, as I have said, the repose, the illumination of the mind, are their own reward. Yet this would be thought about ethics, rather than ethical thought—at least, it would be ethical thought without ethical impulse or disposition, for the real ethical, as contrasted with the purely scientific or speculative, spirit is just in this tendency to action; it

presupposes knowledge, but the characteristic thing about it is the disposition to turn knowledge to account, to live by it and to wish to have others come into living possession of it, too.

To live according to the light we have and try to spread it, and to be receptive toward all new light; to plant our feet firmly on the ground whereon we stand to-day, and yet to turn our faces forward and be ready to strike out on new paths, in the brave hope of leading mankind further on toward its goal—such would seem to be the true ethical spirit.

But if this is all true, what more natural than that a movement should arise on the basis of it? What more natural than that this cause of causes should organize itself and take on body and form? Some of us are familiar with Emerson's words, in which, after remarking that Stoicism has now no temples, he says: "It accuses us that it has none; that pure ethics is not now formulated and concreted into a *cultus*, a fraternity with assemblings and holy days, with song and book, with brick and stone."

The trouble that I suppose many would feel about such a purely ethical movement would be that ethics is so mixed up with other things—with religion, for instance, with science, with practical reform—that it is hardly possible or even necessary to make it a separate thing and cultivate it on its own account. Is not religion, it may be said, an instrumentality for furthering the cause of ethics, and is not science our instructor in ethics, and are not the various reforms the way in which ethics—at least, social ethics—practically works in the world? To belong to a church, to engage in

the scientific study of ethics, and to identify ourselves with some special reform movement or movements—is not this our whole duty, so far as helping the cause of ethics goes? And yet I think one may admit the place and function of all these agencies, and perhaps himself be connected with them, and yet hold that there is a place for a distinctive ethical movement. Let me proceed to show this.

First, as to religion. I should be the last to deny or question that the churches are an ethical instrumentality. However objectionable their beliefs or creeds may be (or may not be), no one who is not a victim to the anti-religious bias can say that they are not on the whole a moral force in the community, and, I should say, the strongest organized moral force. A church; however, stands, of course, for two things—for morality and for certain views of God; these two things at least. Now, there may be certain advantages in this, but there are also disadvantages.

In the first place it provides only for those who hold these two things in common, or, what is the same, does not provide for those who while holding to morality are uncertain about the belief in God. The time was when it might have been (or at least was) said that only the fool could say in his heart there was no God. And perhaps downright atheism was always more or less folly. But *uncertainty* about this greatest of all conceptions cannot be called so. No intelligent man who knows anything of the thinking world to-day can label those who refrain from saying that they believe in God as fools, much less as persons who prefer darkness to light—though pious ignorance in the pulpit does sometimes talk in this way.