

**PERSONAL MORALITY: TWO
LECTURES BEFORE THE SOCIETY
FOR ETHICAL CULTURE OF
CHICAGO, FEBRUARY, 1886**

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Personal Morality: Two Lectures Before the Society for Ethical Culture of Chicago, February, 1886 by William Mackintire Salter

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WILLIAM MACKINTIRE SALTER

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From Prof. H. C. Adams
371 Blue Oct. 1892

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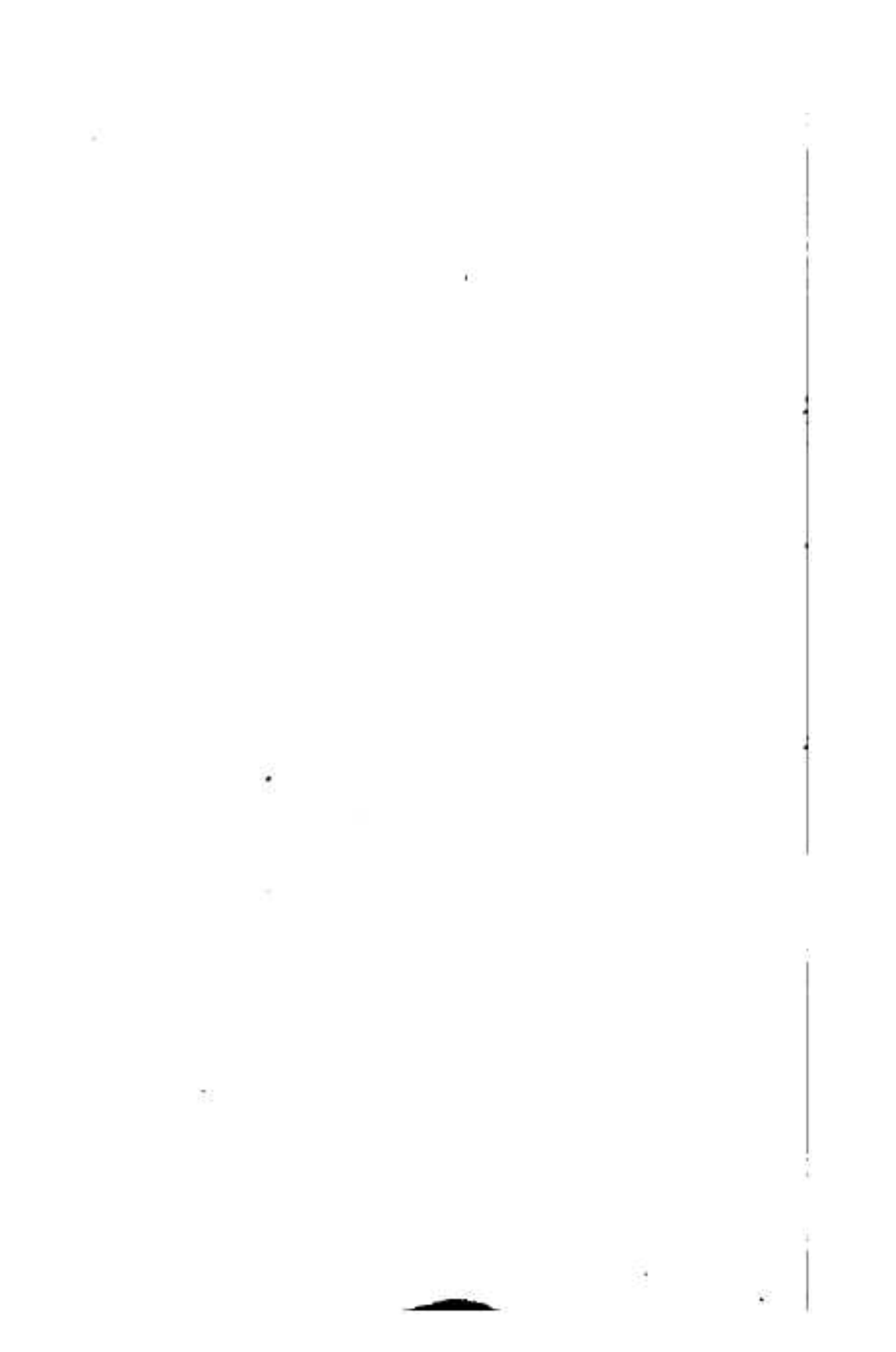
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PERSONAL MORALITY.

THE religion of the future will be in no way, I believe, more strongly contrasted with Christianity than in the increased attention it will give to public questions. Operating powerfully on private life, Christianity has done little to introduce ethics into the world's affairs. To the great social questions of to-day, it is strangely indifferent. But a new religion, with a fresh sense of the principles of justice, will demand their recognition and triumph everywhere. Wherever men have dealings with men,—whether it be between peoples or individuals, and whatever the dealings may be,—there morality has application; and its ideals should be held up.

But it would be a sad mistake to ignore questions relating to the private life of men. There is a social ethics and a private ethics. Often has it been said on this platform that self-reform must go hand in hand with efforts to reform society. We can agitate for religious justice in England and for political and social justice in Ireland; but those reforms are to be *effected* elsewhere, not here,—by Englishmen and Irishmen, not by ourselves.

By personal morality, I mean so much of the good as is to be realized by ourselves and in our own private and interior lives.

A special solemnity gathers about this branch of ethics. It is something, indeed, to think justly and to call for justice, while the many are indifferent to it; but it is a graver thing to feel that we must ourselves do what we demand, that we are responsible for the result. In social ethics, we view ourselves as parts of a whole: in private ethics, each one is himself a whole; and the law he conceives no one else but himself can obey. There is no more wonderful or more moving thought than this of personal responsibility. It strikes home to the centre of ourselves, which is not the mind or the conscience or the heart, but the will. A voice seems to say: To thee, individually, O man, is given a task. Thou art not one of a mass merely: thou countest by thyself. Thou art what no one else in the world is. Thou hast a duty that no one else in the world can do. Sacred art thou in the plan of the world. Revere thyself, then, and fill out thy arc of the great circle of duty. Without thee, that circle must remain forever incomplete.

The first lesson of personal ethics is self-reverence. Morality is sometimes resolved into sympathy and regard for others. It is not so. There is something due ourselves as truly as to father or mother or wife or sister or friend. The same reason that exists for respecting them exists for respecting ourselves. I want no one to show signs of respect to me who does not stand on his or her

own ground, and in their bearing and demeanor show that they have an equal sense of what is due themselves. I cannot conceive anything more lamentable than that one should think that obligation first arises when we think of the claims of others, and that, in his personal and private life, he may do this or that, and just as he pleases, because it concerns himself alone. He who questions that there is a duty to himself is liable to question, sooner or later, whether there be any real duty to others; for the others are only human beings like himself. And, if he feels no obligation toward himself, why should he to them? But the truth is, all are sacred,—others and himself. To all is given a task, to each one particularly and individually, as though no one else were in existence; and the task must, to a certain extent, be accomplished by each one, separately and alone.

What are the things for which we are thus personally responsible? What are the things over which we ourselves have control? First, certainly, our private habits. These may be known by no one but ourselves, but we are as responsible for them as if they were known to all the world. We are responsible, not because of their effect upon others, but because we ought to have pure habits, because these alone are worthy of human beings. Every one should have a certain jealousy over himself, an honest pride in himself, in ruling his own impulses, in never indulging himself to excess, in avoiding all temptations that he knows may be too strong for him, in keeping his body

as well as his soul—what is unseen and what is seen—sweet and clean. Tell me, if it were possible, what a man's private and most solitary habits are, and I will tell you whether he really respects himself, whether whatever decency and respectability he has are for show or are a part of his very fibre and make-up as a man. I have read of some one who, when alone, sat down to dinner with the same regard for form and ceremony as if he were entertaining a company of friends. His instinct, at least, was right. For whatever measure of form and ceremony is proper on such an occasion is so because human beings sit down to the table, and not because of their number. All our private habits should reveal our sense of what is due to the humanity in us. Therefore, we should not drink to excess or eat to excess; for this is brutish. Therefore, we should control all our appetites; otherwise there is the abdication of the reason, which makes the truly human part of us. Therefore, the body should be treated with reverence, because it is the abode and tabernacle of our humanity. Therefore, neglect of the person and slovenliness are disgusting, because they reveal the lack of a sense of what is becoming to a man. Never let us think that our private habits are of no consequence; that, if they do not harm others, they do no harm. They harm us. We know of them, and we are lowered in our own esteem by the knowledge of them. By every unchaste act, by every surrender of reason to passion, by all excess and by all meanness in our manner of life, and neglect of the body as well, the fair