

# The Role Model and the Midwife: The Essence of Theosophical Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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*“Human nature cannot know the mystery of an art without experience.”*

Plato, *Theaetetus*

THE ESSENCE of theosophical ethics can be summed up in one sentence: “Compassionate commitment to that great orphan, humanity.” This simple-sounding phrase is deceptive. It raises the question: how can we help humanity, what are the best means for doing so? The answers are many and subtle, and their exploration constitutes my remarks this morning.

In the *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom* (First Series), the Maha-Chohan writes:

For our doctrines to practically react on the so-called moral code, of the ideas of truthfulness, purity, self-denial, charity, etc., we have to popularise a knowledge of theosophy. It is not the individual and determined purpose of attaining oneself Nirvana . . . which is after all only an exalted and glorious selfishness . . . but the self-sacrificing pursuit of the best means to lead on the right path our neighbor, to cause as many of our fellow-creatures as we possibly can to benefit by it, which constitutes the true theosophist. (p.3)

This passage, containing all the seed ideas of theosophical ethics, asserts that we must live and teach theosophy in order truly to fulfill our task. Implied but not stated here—although evident in *The Mahatma Letters*—is the notion that in order to teach theosophy we must ourselves know something about it. This means that we must study it. Moreover, to be convinced at first hand of the unity of being which forms the fundamental tenet of theosophy, we must be capable to some degree of experiencing it. That implies direct intuitive immersion in this oneness, beyond intellectual abstraction. One avenue is meditation, which can lead us to taste for ourselves something of the underlying ground of this morality which, according to the Maha-Chohan’s vision, we are to live and to teach to others. I shall return to develop these ideas further, namely study and teaching, meditation, and service. They lead to a life of self-transformation and of the transformation of others, and thus if pursued consistently, of the world.

Is this way of life “natural”? The answer is both “yes” and “no”. It is not natural if by “nature” we mean that which is left in its undisturbed state, the immediately given, without purposive intervention or elaboration, i.e., the unconscious and instinctual theory of nature. Theosophical ethics represents the opposite tendency, namely the deliberate and consciously chosen intent toward self-transformation. Viewed in this light, ethics becomes akin to the process of giving birth to a work of art, and is thus linked to creativity.

It can best be compared to the sculptor’s task, chiseling away at the stubborn block of marble, in order to set free the statue that he perceives within. It evokes the heroic dimension in man

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in the August/September 1980 issue of *The American Theosophist*, Official Journal of The Theosophical Society in America.

found in the best philosophical, religious, and artistic literature of mankind. To spell out this heroic dimension of consciousness, I shall in the first half of this presentation view theosophical ethics from an eightfold perspective.

1. *Creativity*. My first point is that this ethic introduces creativity into human life. It is avant-garde with respect to the values of a given culture, and hence is counter-cultural in all times and in all ages, always ahead of its time when measured against established morality. But creativity cannot be restricted to novelty, for that would trivialize theosophical ethics. Creativity here has a deeper meaning: through it we help shape evolution itself. We become partners with the forces greater than ourselves with whom we actively ally ourselves in order to accelerate the course of humanity's evolution.

2. *The steep path*. There is a price for such creativity, and we must be prepared to pay it. Thus a second feature of theosophical ethics is that it makes life harder, not easier. The reasons are two-fold, both inner and outer. From within, we meet resistance and division in the form of inertia, fear, laziness, desire, and the ambivalent pulls toward a life of ease, that Plato summed up in the *Phaedrus* with the remark that "we have not the approval of the whole Soul" in this pursuit. From without, we may meet the hostility, ridicule, and even the violent reaction of the mass-culture, whose entrenched values become threatened by our very being. This entails suffering and sometimes persecution. Such names as Pythagoras, Christ, Hypatia of Alexandria (the great martyred neo-Platonist), Bruno, the Albigensians, and more recently, H.P.B., herself a near martyr, attest to this fact.

It is therefore untrue to claim that theosophical ethics, properly understood, can ever be what Marx said of religion, namely "the opiate of the people," designed to pacify and tranquilize us into passivity, submission, comfort or conformity. That metaphor is misleading in any case, as the history of mysticism and esoteric philosophy makes clear. In the exoteric Western tradition, no figure better understood the demands on the religious consciousness than did Kierkegaard, the great nineteenth century religious philosopher. Far from being a tranquilizer, said Kierkegaard, the truly religious life is so demanding that it is more akin to a heavy weight upon our backs than to a soporific.

3. *Meaningfulness*. If theosophical ethics makes our lives harder rather than easier, why does it attract us so powerfully? This constitutes my third point, and is the corollary to creativity. Theosophical ethics makes life profoundly meaningful. Through its challenge, our lives gather focus and direction, but above all, they gain the depth and rootedness without which we cannot be truly human. We are the meaning-seeking creature, and this vision of the world nourishes us to the core. It appeals to our needs not just our wants, and I believe that while we can live without most of our wants, we cannot live without our basic needs. Among these are not just food, shelter, and clothing, but meaning and an avenue for expressing the spiritual side of our nature. It would be difficult to single out and name the meanings that theosophy confers on our lives, for the canvass is rich and beautiful. I shall therefore focus on one of its expressions, namely our interconnectedness.

4. *Interconnectedness and oneness*. My fourth point is so basic to our outlook that I need scarcely dwell on it here. It links all entities within one indissoluble unity, and places us into a universe that is alive throughout. The beauty of this concept cannot be captured in words, and I shall say little about it. For me, it has become epitomized in a tangible way, etched in bronze at the East gate at Olcott, where one single sentence carries all that we are about: "All

*life is one, and even the humblest forms enshrine divinity.*” Each time I return to Olcott, I make my pilgrimage to that gate to read those words.

5. *Truth.* This outlook is true. The doctrine of the unity of being is a truthful cosmology. The opposite claim (espoused by physicalists, behaviorists, materialists, modern-day atomists) is being shown increasingly false by the best scientific minds today. The idea that the universe is random, disconnected, accidental and governed by pure chance (as Jacques Monod claims in his *Chance and Necessity*), not only entails a confused and meaningless life, but, since it is built on untruth, it cannot work. Today, even physics bears out the theosophical vision of the universe far more than it does any other vision, notwithstanding the fact that all formulations are just approximations to the truth, not the whole truth but “something like the truth,” as Plato observed in his *Phaedrus*. With the idea of the universe as a hologram, (propounded by physicist David Bohm and neurologist Karl Pribram), science itself is moving toward the view that we are all part of one another, enfolded within one another in an interconnected unity on which we can draw in our ethical lives. Therefore, though theosophical ethics may be the harder way, it is the truer way because it mirrors the way the universe seems to be.

6. *Exaltation.* This grasp of truth and of goodness of truth leads to what Plato, Spinoza, and Einstein knew at first hand, namely a sense of exaltation. The theosophical path instills us with a sense of trust in the universe, giving rise to joy and optimism that the ultimate foundation of things is benevolent, orderly, and just. It is nourishing and provides the courage and the confidence for the difficult life outlined above. Although more is demanded from us, through this heightened sense of life, we receive a mysterious gift. But this crude calculus carries its dangers, and this leads to my seventh point: our motive for living this way of life.

7. *Motive.* The motive is all important to our ethics, and is the most interesting and subtle aspect of the Maha-Chohan's comments. We must be drawn to theosophical ethics for the right reasons. Not

harder—for that would be because it fills one with pragmatism or a kind of masochism. These are the wrong

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because it makes life be masochism—nor yet exaltation—for that would be spiritual hedonism. reasons and with them

even if we go through the right motions, we shall be missing the point. Therefore, we can conclude that the essence of theosophical ethics is not rules, but an inner attitude that can irradiate our lives.

The Mahatmas spell this out clearly and bluntly in their Letters. I quote from Letter 2; where Master K.H. addresses Mr. Sinnett:

To our minds . . . [your] motives, sincere and worthy of every serious consideration from the worldly standpoint, appear—selfish. They are selfish because you must be aware that the chief object of the T.S. is not so much to gratify individual aspirations as to serve our fellow men . . . Perhaps you will better appreciate our meaning when told that in our view the highest aspirations for the welfare of humanity become tainted with selfishness if, in the mind of the philanthropist, there lurks the shadow of desire for self benefit or a tendency to do injustice, even when these exist unconsciously to himself. (p.8, third edition).

Mahatma M., in other letters, echoes this view which, harsh as it may at first appear, is the very idea of ethics carried to its consistent and clear conclusion. To soften what may strike us as too stern to us, Mahatma M. writes, in Letter 45: “Blame not the holy man for strictly doing his duty by humanity.”

Commitment to humanity thus is central to theosophical ethics. From this premise are deducible the specific traits and qualities that the Mahatmas commend in their letters. Beyond this, it means commitment to all that lives, to the principle of ahimsa or reverence for life, not adding suffering to any creature’s life by bringing it pain. To me, this extends logically to the animal world, not taking any life whatever. Again, esoteric ethics from Buddhism through Pythagoras and Plato, bears out the ideas of *The Mahatma Letters*, that compassion must override convenience if we are to be consistent in our ethics.

8. *Consistency*. The idea of consistency of thought and act is my eighth point. It entails integration and wholeness, providing a basic harmony in our daily lives for these concepts. Without this solid basis in dailiness, there is danger that we may vaguely float in abstractions. To use Kierkegaard's metaphor, it is “to get stuck in infinity,” without translating the infinite into our finite, daily lives. The religious consciousness craves harmony between what it knows and what it does, its vision and its existence. Such a rootedness in the soil of daily life suggests a certain way of being and doing and valuing, and it rules out as contradictory certain other ways. The esoteric tradition proclaims this as with one voice. Plato voiced it poetically: man is a plant, he observes in the *Timaeus*, whose roots are up in heaven.

The ascent toward spiritualization is steep and cannot be borne without the solidity and stability of the climber's life: his body, his feelings, his thoughts and his acts must harmonize and not conflict with his spiritual longing, symbolized by the summit. In the absence of this harmony, the merely difficult becomes impossible.

Beyond this, the climb must be energized by being shared in a living context, a community of seekers to whom the climb is central. This idea is clearly expressed in Rene Daumal’s novel *Mount Analogue*, which depicts the path through the metaphor of mountain-

But where was I to look? Where could I begin? I had already covered the world, poked my nose into everything, into all kinds of religious sects and mystic cults. But with all of them it came down to the same dilemma: maybe yes, maybe no. Why should I stake my life on this one rather than on that one? You see, I had no touchstone. But the very fact that there are now *two of us* changes everything. The task doesn't become twice as easy. After having been *impossible* it has become *possible*. (p.53).

The immediate practical expression of the points I have been pursuing is three-fold; study, reflecting itself as comprehension of the great theosophical principles; service, reflected as commitment to others rather than merely to oneself, the Copernican Revolution in ethics, where humanity and not the self is at the center; third, meditation, the language of silence, experienced as an expansion of our consciousness and an awareness—however brief—of our rootedness within a greater whole. Lastly, there is a remarkable fusion of two of these: study and service. Together, they become teaching, which to me is an intrinsic and even a sacred part of theosophical ethics.

Study, teaching, service, and meditation embody the very essence of this ethic. With these as background I would like to spend the remainder of my remarks developing two powerful metaphors drawn from Plato, which I shall also relate to the spirit of *The Mahatma Letters*. They are: *The role-model and the midwife*.

The role-model lives what he teaches. He literally embodies his principles and thus there is complete harmony between what he knows and what he is. He is a being “knit of one piece,” to quote Kierkegaard. This harmony is in itself a teaching, even if the role-model were never to speak a word. Hesse captured this insight in his novel, *Siddhartha*, describing Siddhartha's first encounter with the Buddha,

[Siddhartha] looked attentively at Gotama's head, at his shoulders, at his feet, at his still, downward-hanging hand, and it seemed to him that in every joint of every finger of his hand there was knowledge; they spoke, breathed, radiated truth. This man, this Buddha, was truly a holy man to his fingertips. I have never seen a man look and smile, sit and walk like that, he thought . . . A man only looks and walks like that when he has conquered his Self. I also will conquer my Self.

This same wordless teaching explains why one visit from the Master M. had so powerful an impact on Colonel Olcott that his life was permanently changed by it. It was not the Mahatma's teaching but his being. More accurately, the Mahatma's being was itself the teaching.

He was so grand a man, so imbued with the majesty of moral strength, so luminously spiritual, so evidently above average humanity, that I felt abashed in his presence... I returned to my room to think, and the gray morning found me still thinking and resolving. Out of those thoughts and those resolves developed all my subsequent theosophical activities, and that loyalty to the Masters behind our movement, which the rudest shocks and the cruellest disillusioning have never shaken . . . However others less fortunate may doubt, I KNOW. (*Old Diary Leaves*, vol. I, p. 381).

This passage evokes the role-model fully and powerfully developed.

The other Platonic metaphor, the *midwife*, comes from Plato's *Theaetetus*. Like the philosopher-king, the midwife is also a teacher, but in a different vein. Though actively and explicitly teaching, via Socratic dialogue and questioning, the midwife does not cram facts into the student's head. Her role rather is the opposite: to help deliver the student of the truths that lie within him, ripe and ready to come forth. Thus, the midwife brings forth life, ideas that are vibrant, not dead abstractions. These latter Plato calls “still-born,” because they are mere “wind-eggs,” he observes bluntly, for they will not lead to change.

By contrast, when, aided by the searching Socratic partner, we give birth to living insights, we generate inner power, passion, clarity, and hence energy to sustain us in our ethical lives.

From this I conclude that theosophical ethics is closely bound up with education. To reflect its crucial role, and to distinguish it from the narrow mechanical training or mere schooling that today has so often replaced true education in our culture, I must invoke the Greek meaning of education, for nothing less will do. They called it *paideia*, and it can be described as follows:

*Paideia* is education looked upon as a life-long transformation of the human personality, in which every aspect of life plays a part... *Paideia*... is the task of giving form to the act of living itself: treating every occasion of life as a means of self-fabrication, and as part of a larger process of converting facts into values, processes into purposes, hopes and plans into consummation and

realizations. *Paideia* is not merely a learning: it is a making and a shaping; and man himself is the work of art that *paideia* seeks to form. (Lewis Mumford in Peter Abbs, *Reclamation*).

We can now see that the creative aspect of theosophical ethics alluded to earlier is a *paideia*—a transformation of the whole person and ultimately of humanity. Study, teaching, service, and meditation all play their part in this process, are all a kind of *paideia*, are all an expression of our longing to become “knit of one piece.”

In *paideia*, there is no contradiction between the role-model and the midwife, nor can they be separated in action. The deeper consciousness within us (Atma, Buddhi) that makes its voice heard in the background, is the role-model, which already is what we in the foreground still grope to become. The midwife within, through its remorseless questioning, fosters continuous dialogue with the role-model. It is dialogue between the various voices of our being and results in our readiness to take responsibility for what we do and are, i.e., in our clear grasp of karma as a living law, not as some glib or dusty abstraction. For example, desire (our kama nature), may conflict with the vision of the role-model, and the midwife in us mediates in this conflict and helps us to transform desire into creativity or spirituality. We thereby use the energy of our instinctual drives in order to transmute them into their spiritual counterparts (as both Nietzsche and Freud observed).

Plato understood this process well, and knew that these are active voices both within us and in the universe. The ultimate role-model in Plato is *the Good*. It inspires us, and attracts us powerfully toward itself in all that we do, even when we seem to seek out other goods (cf. *Symposium*). It is a cosmic love *eros*, as Plato portrays it in the *Symposium*. The archetypal midwife in Plato is the voice of *recollection*, reminding us even amidst our scatteredness in the cave of what we know, of what we have glimpsed, of what we are—an “ancient and sacred truth,” he says in *Timaeus*.

This is but half the process. To be role-model and midwife to oneself is still too limited. It borders on the danger of selfishness which the Mahatmas so resoundingly repudiate in the *Letters*, when they reject all requests for a private tutorial in occultism, motivated by the desire for personal advancement. In its modern form, it has been called “the culture of narcissism,” by Christopher Lasch, and one pitfall of our present age.

To avoid this danger and this pitfall, we must be role-model and midwife to others as well as to ourselves. This is not easy. As role-models to others, we testify to our vision through our lives. A theosophist becomes recognizable not merely by his beliefs, the doctrines he espouses (on these we rarely all agree in any case!), but by how he treats others, by how earnestly he treads “the path with a heart,” to invoke Castaneda.

This, too, can be pushed further. This tradition in ethics, from Plato and Buddha through the Mahatmas, urges that we also become *midwives* to one another: teaching, helping give birth to understanding, capable of listening to the voice within the other with such rare patience and sensitivity that we can help him to gain access to the knowledge within and to make it his own, to recollect it in Plato’s sense. This dual embodiment of role-model and midwife can avoid two undesirable extremes. If our concern is restricted to teaching only ourselves, we become self-centered. If it lies only with teaching others, we may become self-righteous and too judgmental. The combination of role-model and midwife toward both ourselves and others will, instead, bring the needed balance.

Like any skill, the skill of the midwife is rare, a high art. In its absence, we have not skill but sentimentality, of little use to those in labor, whether physically or spiritually. In Plato, this is a sacred role, reminiscent of the priestess, demanding total dedication.

I am aware that what I have outlined is strenuous and may require us to stretch beyond what we think is possible. However, this harmony of being, of knowing, of caring is the key that unlocks the door to another world, whose laws are stern and magnificent. With that key, we can begin to cross the threshold to that world, and to learn increasingly to live by its laws, laws not man-made but impersonal and implacable, embodied in the cosmos itself, as Mahatma K.H. tells us in Letter 10.

What I have been trying to suggest is summed up in Letter 2 by Master K.H., for whom it is knowledge, not speculation, and who no longer lives *by* it but *in* it.

True, we have our schools and teachers ... and the door is always open to the right man who knocks. And we invariably welcome the newcomer; only instead of going over to him he has to come to us. Is any of you so eager for knowledge and the beneficent powers it confers as to be ready to leave your world and come into ours? Then let him come . . . Let him come by all means, as the pupil to the master, and without conditions . . . (p.8, third edition).

The Mahatma then depicts in specific language some conditions an aspirant on this path will be expected to meet.

Supposing you were to abandon all for the truth; to toil wearily for years up the hard steep road, not daunted by obstacles, firm under every temptation . . . had worked with all your energy and unselfishly to spread the truth and provoke men to correct thinking and a correct life . . . (p.9, third edition)

This last passage, in particular, brings home that in itself the “path with a heart” is not enough. It does not lead by itself to spirituality. The energies of that path must be harmonized with knowledge in order for wisdom to be born. In the *Letters*, in Plato, in Buddhism, this requires “entering that other world,” insight into the laws of the universe clearly glimpsed so that we can share our vision with others in clear language, instead of restricting it to ourselves as private experience, where others cannot follow us.

Such a view conceals both a paradox and a mandate. The paradox is this: the path, though it must be walked alone, cannot be isolated. If that is true, we must help others in their spiritual birth. We must teach them, and in order to teach, one must know. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that theosophy places a mandate, not an option, before us in the *Letters*. Again, the key is our motive.

The mandate is to learn in order that we may teach and share, not to learn in order to hoard for ourselves. This makes of the paradox: the path with the heart, when and walked in spiritual from being sterile, cerebral—as knowledge can become the gateway because it is the antechamber to intuition and to wisdom. (That is the whole point of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*).

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possible the reconciliation of knowledge is itself the motivated by compassion commitment to others. Far unbalanced and merely today often is—knowledge to the mystical world,

Thus learning, teaching, serving, and being all are parts of one interconnected living process. Just as dying and rebirth are processes continuously active within us, so are learning and teaching, i.e., *paideia*. The midwife to spiritual children is ever giving birth to what is dynamic, not to a static endpoint in time. This coheres with the doctrine of *dharma*, which is also a *paideia*, one vast learning experience spread over the aeons, more powerful than time and place, transcending both by etching its living lesson into the very being who undergoes the journey.

I shall summarize these thoughts with a question: “What must be learned on this journey?” What we must learn is this: that the role-model and the midwife are and must be bound together until the midwife has fulfilled the obligation laid upon her by the role-model within (the Monad) and has recognized who she is. In this, the role-model and the midwife merge and emerge as a whole being. The outcome is the enlightened consciousness, the Adept, who in turn remains in the world as both role-model and midwife to other and yet newer pilgrims.

Both these figures are necessary. If only the role-model is real to us (the Master, the Adept, the Platonic Form), we become worshippers and perfectionists, and run the danger of becoming passive or paralyzed before too lofty an ideal with which we compare ourselves unfavorably, and this may lead us to abdicate our personal responsibility.

If only the midwife is real, we easily slip into scepticism, cynicism, or a relativism that is rooted in nothing but the critical mind itself. Hence, even the historical Socrates had his role-model, namely his divine inner “daemon,” who inspired his search for integrity.

The meaning of theosophical ethics therefore becomes clear. It draws on the Master within through dialogue and example. This can slowly turn us around and change the focus of our lives, but it cannot be forced. It must be organic, proceeding from within. From this I conclude that the essence of theosophical ethics is freedom, autonomy, not authority. The Mahatmas on this view are the most fully realized role-models and midwives to the soul, dwelling both outside of us and within us.

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### The Path

Unfortunately, however great your purely *human* intellect, your spiritual intuitions are dim and hazy, having been never developed. Hence, whenever you find yourself confronted by an apparent contradiction, by a difficulty, a kind of *inconsistency* of occult nature, one that is caused by our time honoured laws and regulations — Of which you know nothing, for your time has not yet come) — forthwith your doubts are aroused, your suspicions bud out—and one finds that they have made mock at your better nature, which is finally crushed down by all these deceptive appearances of outward things! You have not the faith required to allow your Will to arouse itself in defiance and contempt against your purely worldly intellect, and give you a better understanding of things hidden and laws unknown. You are unable, I see, to force your better aspirations—fed at the stream of a real devotion to the Maya you have made yourself of me—(a feeling in you that has always profoundly touched me)—to lift up the head against cold, *spiritually blind* reason; to allow your heart to pronounce loudly

and proclaim that which it has hitherto only been allowed to whisper: “Patience, patience. A great design has never been snatched at once.” You were told, however, that the path to Occult Sciences has to be trodden laboriously and crossed at the danger of life; that every new step in its leading to the final goal is surrounded by pit-falls and cruel thorns; that the pilgrim who ventures upon it is made first to confront and *conquer* the thousand and one furies who keep watch over, its adamantine gates and entrance—furies called Doubt, Skepticism, Scorn, Ridicule, Envy and finally Temptation—especially the latter; and that he who would see *beyond* had to first destroy this living wall; that he must be possessed of a heart and soul clad in steel, and of an iron, never failing determination and yet be meek and gentle, humble and have shut out from his heart every human passion, that leads to evil.

*The Mahatma Letters*, Letter 62, third edition.