

The Theosophical Movement

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[Page 1] NO reasonable man can hope to avoid misunderstandings altogether in connection with a new movement of thought. For anyone concerned with such a movement, the hardship of being saddled with assertions he never made, and doctrines he never propounded, is very great; but this treatment has to be accepted with patience as a natural consequence of the mental activity characteristic of our age and country. People of quick imagination cannot help criticising new ideas wherever they crop up, no matter how crude and fragmentary their presentation, and such ideas are lucky if not so dealt with on the basis of a fragmentary statement purposely put forward as a caricature. This last fate, as well as the first, has often befallen the Theosophical movement, but in truth, it is an effort which no cultivated and well-disposed person of any nationality, who comprehends it rightly, can have any ground for regarding either with ridicule or hostility. If false impressions concerning the objects of the Theosophical Society are kept aside, as well as mistaken notions in reference to abnormal occurrences that have perhaps been too much talked about in connection with its work, there will remain a path of operations, which every one may not think it worth while to enter upon, but which no man, amenable to the force of reason, can condemn as a path leading to evil consequences or resulting from any sort of delusion.

In other words, people who have become zealous members of the Theosophical Society are governed by a disposition to think that highly important truths, relating to the origin and future destinies of man, may be reached by a certain line of study, and that a great deal may be done towards obliterating the acrimonious warfare of sects, by uniting for the purposes of such study in a broad, loosely organised association, which exacts from its fellows no subscription to any test or belief whatever, beyond a simple recognition of the principle that men may wisely engage in a fraternal search for those fundamental truths which must underlie the discrepant creeds of the modern world, so far as each or any of these creeds have real truth in them. Already, indeed, some members of the Theosophical Society believe that they have prosecuted this search along the lines indicated by the founders of the Society with great success. Individual members may conceive, with varying degrees of confidence, that certain persons who have communicated to them within the pale of the society the results, or some of the results, of *their* search after spiritual truth, have shown themselves so richly endowed with knowledge and intellectual capacity as to be manifestly [Page 2] qualified in an extraordinary degree to point out the way to others, and thus to save new inquirers 99 per cent, of the trouble they would otherwise have to take. But if ever it is represented that Theosophists are the blindly credulous recipients of a great volume of cut and dried Oriental dogmatism, that statement can only be a more or less disingenuous perversion of the state of things just described. As Theosophists they are simply inquirers after truth, and may not be the less Theosophists because they are also, as the case may be, Christians, Hindoos, Mahomedans, or Parsees.

Will an objection be raised at the threshold here, to the effect that so vague an aspiration as the desire

for spiritual truth can be no bond of union; that everyone who reads or thinks of serious things is to that extent a Theosophist, by this definition already, and without having ever heard of the persons who have especially arrogated to themselves that title ? Certainly, every open-minded person who reads or thinks with the view of revising, and not merely with that of confirming, established conceptions, is a potential Theosophist, but in the society that has recently been formed to pursue such revision systematically, there is just so much of a predominant leaning towards enquiry, in a certain direction, as to give the society a clearly-defined reason for its existence, without militating against the intellectual liberty of its members. This leaning has been determined by what the present leaders of the society regard as their great success in obtaining an insight into spiritual science, with the help of some members of a certain organisation, that has its principal seat at present in Tibet. It is only within very recent years that anything has been known of this organisation beyond the circle of its own initiates, and whenever, among persons who have paid any attention to the matter at all, a low estimate is formed of the importance of the Theosophical movement, this can only ensue from a doubt whether the information now current in the world concerning the organisation referred to is to be relied on. For if I am even approximately right in the statements which in some books of mine on the subject I have ventured to put forward, the assistance of those who are known in the East as the Mahatmas cannot but be of priceless importance for all students of spiritual truth, whatever their creed or nationality.

The convictions formed by those of us who think we have ascertained with certainty that the occult fraternity of the Mahatmas, or adepts, has a real existence, are to the effect that the members of this fraternity have developed, by extraordinary exertions, a faculty for exploring the mysteries of nature along some other paths besides those marked out by the physical senses. The chain of evidence on which those convictions rest is long and intricate, and it is in reference to this evidence especially that misunderstandings on the part of careless readers of fragmentary Theosophical writings are so apt to arise. Just as in the case of a very long trial before a court of justice, some detached portions of the evidence will seem, by readers of these alone, to have no connection with the main facts under examination, so the records of some isolated occurrences that have [Page 3] interested Theosophical enquirers, as contributing to establish some link in the chain of their evidence, will often be scoffed at as trivial and insignificant bases for the large conclusions supposed to be derived from them. But the evidence, patiently summed up, if examined as a whole, will not be found insufficient, and the smallest incident, revealing on the part of those who are invested in any degree with the abnormal powers of the Mahatmas, may be a brick in the edifice — may serve its purpose in demonstrating the possibility that, by the methods of self-development which the Mahatmas employ, faculties are awakened that subserve the investigation of natural laws, ranging beyond those that can be appreciated with the aid of the physical senses only. The mistake constantly made in reference to this branch of the argument is, that the abnormal phenomena which are thus treated as of importance are gloated over with a mere wonder-loving enthusiasm by their narrators as supernatural occurrences, held, because they are supernatural, to be miraculous guarantees of a new religion. Nothing of the kind is claimed on their behalf. There are no students of physical science in any laboratory in London who are more emphatic in repudiating the supernatural, as an absurd contradiction in terms, than the students of occult science. These are quite well aware that, when they encounter a physical phenomenon, apparently doing violence to what are commonly received as the laws of matter, its importance lies — *not* in the notion, which they never contemplate for an instant, that the order of Nature has been reversed in this case, but in the evidence so afforded that the previously received conception of the order of Nature has been shown to be incomplete. And when they find that the phenomenon under consideration exhibits, on the part of those by whom it is provoked, a grasp of some higher generalisation than that which has sufficed to embrace more commonplace phenomena, the importance they attach to that discovery is as follows: They argue, as it seems to me, not unreasonably, that within the limits of that higher generalisation it is very likely that a

purview of Nature is obtainable, that may bring within the knowledge of those enjoying it an enlarged group of experiences calculated to throw light on many problems which appear to transcend "the knowable" from the lower standpoint. It is quite true that none of the very many abnormal phenomena that have been witnessed by many theosophic students, nor even all of them collectively, constitute a demonstration of the whole scheme of teaching concerning the past and future evolution of humanity that has been obtained, by this time, from the Mahatmas. But these phenomena, and the assurances of a variety of persons in a position to know, do prove that Mahatmas exist, and exercise powers which link the operations of mind with the phenomena of matter, and exhibit the consciousness and will of man as forces, under some circumstances of extraordinary potency, capable of effecting consequences far beyond the range of the nervous and muscular systems in which those forces habitually reside, The phenomena of which I myself have been the [Page 4] observer, not to speak of many others of a far more striking character testified to by others quite as well entitled as I am to be credited with common honesty in giving their evidence, distinctly demonstrate the fact that some persons are capable of exercising their faculties of perception and reflection, and communicating ideas at places far remote from those at which their bodies may be stationed at the time. The laws of nature, of which they avail themselves in doing this — just as we may avail ourselves on the physical plane of the laws relating to the constitution of gases, when we send the voice along a speaking-tube — are on that which, till we understand it better, we may be content to call the psychic plane, but are laws of Nature none the less, and it is just this fact which renders the evidences so afforded important. Our detractors erroneously suppose that we are delighted with these phenomena, because we conceive them to be supernatural. We are delighted with them for exactly the opposite reason — because we know them to be natural, and, knowing this, perceive the splendid range of possibilities in the direction of acquiring knowledge concerning the higher truths of Nature with which the power of observing on the psychic plane may very probably endow their authors.

The Mahatmas are not fond of putting forward *ex-cathedra* statements, and that which they may have been most inclined to do, so far as they have taken any active part in directing the philosophic studies of the Theosophic Society, has been to indicate the light which may be thrown upon the evolution of humanity, and the laws of Nature in her higher realms, by the intelligent consideration of old Aryan literature and philosophy, and most of the doctrine so far conveyed to us by the Mahatmas may be shown to lurk under various intricate disguises in Sanscrit writings which have either not yet been translated at all, or have been translated with reference to the surface meaning only, so that the translations sometimes obliterate the esoteric meaning altogether. Still, of late, and by degrees, with the help of the Mahatmas, some of us in the Theosophical Society have picked up so much of this esoteric meaning, that when it comes to be presented in a coherent shape, people often find fault with it because they regard it as *ex-cathedra* statement.

This is only one of the misunderstandings it is my present purpose to dispel The Theosophical Society is an organisation of enquirers after truth, but unless it is perpetually unsuccessful in its search, it cannot help the accumulation in the hands of its most earnest and persevering members of (what they regard as) a large harvest of truth. New comers are certainly not expected to accept this *en bloc*, but in charging the society with being a band of crocheteers who pin their faith unreasonably on a system of cosmogony and anthropology as unproved as it is stupendous, the opponents of the theosophical movements are certainly misdirecting their criticism. It is open to any person to state the conclusions to which his own studies have led him, and if other persons find these conclusions sufficiently interesting to trace them back to their origin, well and good. No [Page 5] one who shrinks from the trouble of so tracing them back will derive much benefit from them; but, at all events, this trouble may be considerably less than that which, in the first instance, gave rise to their evolution. So far every one who may be disposed to try the

path of Theosophical enquiry, even in the most tentative spirit, will be inconvenienced and need not be deterred by the fact that his forerunners have formulated and published by this time a good many of the discoveries they believe themselves to have made.

The core, or main truth, underlying these discoveries, as far as I comprehend them is this: — The spiritual evolution of man is a process that is blended as it goes on with the physical evolution of the race as traced by the Darwinian theory, but it is not included in that physical evolution. It may be taken note of, by some of those higher faculties brought into play on the psychic plane of natural phenomena, and may be observed to be going on, on that plane, quite independently of its progress on the physical plane. That which, for convenience sake, we may here speak of as the human soul — though the constitution of the soul, examined in the light of esoteric science, is so complex that the word is not perfectly applicable all along the line — goes through a process of evolution as prolonged and elaborate in each individual case as the evolution of the physical types in which it manifests on the physical plane at successive periods of its growth. The soul is an entity, having materiality of a kind, though the matter of which it is composed is not in the same order of matter as that which constitutes human bodies on this earth, and many of the phenomena which interest students of occult science are valuable, because they demonstrate the existence of this matter of the higher kind. The soul entity or individualised ego, of a human creature, having once attained to that condition, by passing through the lower forms of animated nature, is then educated by successive human incarnations, and refreshed by successive periods of existence on the higher psychic plane. Its individuality is preserved throughout these successive processes of growth, and the fact that the personal adventures of each incarnation are forgotten by the time the next comes on, does not in any way, when the circumstances of such forgetfulness are rightly appreciated, militate against the unity of the individual. They are summed up in the essence or the ego by the time the period for re-incarnation arrives, and thus constitute the advance which that ego has made by virtue of its last life, along the path of spiritual evolution, but they are not even forgotten until they have been fully developed in all their consequences in the psychic existence immediately following the physical life to which they have belonged. There is ample time for this exhaustion of their effects, because the whole process of human evolution is so deliberate that thousands of years may elapse between the successive incarnations of the same individual ego. If this gradual wearing away of the life memories in each case strikes a new-comer to the theory as a comfortless notion, that can only be due to an inadequate appreciation, on his [Page 6] part, of what long periods of time really mean. Anyone who says "Such or such a feeling in me can never be exhausted, my interest in the life experiences I am passing through, my desire to remember myself as I know myself now, and to compare any later fate that may await me with the destinies I have already endured, can never die away" — in saying that, he is simply failing to realise the ultimate significance of the word "never". A man may be so full of thought and affection, and his mental grasp of his "personality", *i.e.*, of the bundle of specific recollections which have grouped themselves during his life around the central core of his imperishable individuality, may be so strong, that he may quite rightly regard that personality as logically and in justice entitled to a prodigious prolongation. Very well: there is no law of Nature, according to the esoteric interpretation thereof, to say Nay to his aspirations. These recollections, affections, and active mental states, inhere not in the body, which goes to the coffin, but in the far more durable psychic body which death sets free from its grosser encasement. The true ego thus liberated is under no obligation to return to earth as long as the feelings and aspirations referred to continue in activity, and let us attempt for a moment to measure the future possibilities of their activity by a retrospective comparison. We can look back over some few thousand years of history. We can retrace our steps in imagination along the story of our own country, till with some distinct impression of the length of time concerned we get back into the Roman era, and across that stepping-stone of thought we can roll fancy backward into the misty period of Egyptian civilisation. Let the man who feels that he will be wronged if he does not retain his personal recollections "for ever" imagine

himself perpetuating them along a channel of thought in experience which these exclusively engage, all through the future history of the earth, till the Victorian era of British civilisation has been covered with later strata of events, as thickly as the era of the heptarchy is covered for us. Is his unconquerable love of his own personality unsatisfied still ? There is, still, at all events, no natural law, if so, which blots it out. In the processes of geologic change this country itself may melt away, and new continents may be formed to be colonised afresh and slowly bear their social organisations of civilised men. If the ego of our hypothesis is egotistic still, he will hold on to the existence in which that egotism has free scope; but, in truth, the conjecture does a wrong to human nature. The most pleasurable day wears to a close, the most active votary of its enjoyments craves at last for rest, the fullest and brightest life of the kind we are familiar with so far, is for time and not for eternity. At last its feelings, its emotions, its experiences will be sublimated to a true essence which represents the progress of the real individual along the path of spiritual evolution, and thus advanced, the fully refreshed ego will be born again, to take a fresh departure, as from the day-light of another morning.

And it is well for our ultimate perfection that this is the law, for only by [Page 7] a long series of such new departures can the human soul accumulate the attributes required to lead it on to that higher evolution to which it is naturally destined in the future, and from the standpoint of which the humanity, we know at present will be looked back upon, almost as we look back upon the lower forms of animal life. This is one of the many profoundly satisfactory aspects of the esoteric doctrine. The history of humanity, viewed by the light thus thrown upon it, is not the purposeless agglomeration of suffering which some less highly sensitive interpretations would have it. It is not a crude tangle of injustice, in which one person is blessed with all happiness, and another cursed with all misery, and both alike treated to an equal share of an unchangeable beatitude afterwards. We may discern in the nature of the esoteric teaching the operation of a retributive law which does not merely obliterate the inequalities of its earlier working by a deluge of results out of proportion to any merit or demerit that can be concerned, but which meets every case with absolute flexibility, and never departs one hair's breadth from the strict fulfilment of justice to each and every human being. Not merely in its operation as regards the ultimate spiritual perfection of the soul, but in regard, also, to the worldly experiences of incarnation, the law of consequences, to which the Oriental philosophy gives the name "Karma", tracks each individual along the almost interminable procession of his incarnations and metes out to him the fruit of his own growth. The doctrine does not teach its followers to be callous on that account to human suffering, to leave unturned any stone, the turning of which may afford such suffering relief. But it does supply a sublime justification of suffering which may reconcile us to that which is truly inevitable in our own destiny, as well as in those of others whom we can only reach with a helpless sympathy.

It may, perhaps, be urged that the religious system round us may reconcile us to this by teaching a profound, if as yet unenlightened, trust in the benevolence of God, in whose inscrutable government of the world we may be sure that good will come out of evil eventually, and the dark mysteries of existence in this world be unriddled by-and-by. And no esoteric teacher would resent this trustful confidence: he would only point out that the esoteric doctrine gives us the explanation much sooner than might have been expected, of the manner in which the good is evoked from the evil, of the providential ways that we might have feared would remain inscrutable much longer. The esoteric doctrine does not come to break down, sweep away, or discredit existing religious systems. It comes, on the contrary, to justify them in their essentials, to put aside, with all gentleness, if possible, distortions of original divine truth which have crept over the face of theological dogma, but mainly to give the world a last exact knowledge of spiritual science, so that the actual verities underlying a great many shadowy, but not on that account erroneous, beliefs may present themselves in clear outlines to the understanding, and constitute intelligible springs

of action, the intelligent recognition of which may [Page 8] thenceforward conduce much more efficiently to the higher spiritual evolution of the future than could be accomplished by the further influence of a blind, however beautiful, piety.

In England the Theosophical movement must, probably for some time to come, present itself chiefly to public attention in its aspect as a system of philosophical inquiry; but its true importance would be ill-appreciated if we considered it merely in this light. In India the movement has another bearing, and there its philosophical is intimately blended with its social and philanthropic aspects. The rivalry of warring sects in Europe, keen as it may sometimes appear, is a small evil compared with the hitherto irreconcilable hostility of the various religious schools, sects, and castes into which the population of India is broken up. The Theosophical Society has, for the first time in modern Indian history, succeeded in constructing a common platform on which Hindoo, Mussulman, Buddhist and Parsee may stand in a fraternal alliance. It has, in actual fact, laid the foundations of the "Universal Brotherhood". which it emphasises as the foremost object of its appeal to the world. With a hundred branches in different parts of the country — the magnificent fruit of Colonel Olcott's untiring exertions — the nucleus of this grand union of humanity has already taken shape. In the beginning some objections were raised to the programme of the Association on the ground that, beautiful as the idea of universal brotherhood might be, it was merely another phrase for the millennium, and that no practical result was likely to ensue from the promulgation of an idea as vague as the motto of a copy-book. But the Society has lived to prove that, in alliance with the philosophical views it is enabled to suggest, its aspirations towards an all-embracing fraternity are by no means an ebullition of empty sentiment. To begin with, the fraternity it aims at is not vitiated by the lower objects of material socialism. It is no community of goods which the Theosophical Society desires to set on foot, but a community of spiritual aspiration, of intellectual endeavour. And it claims this by helping to show that every man whose religion embodies a desire to ascertain essential truth, and not only to trifle with the formalities of ceremonial, or to fight for the predominance of a dogma, must at last reach a common platform on which he will find himself side by side with every other truth seeker, no matter from what point of the compass he sets out. This is the way in which the guidance in the study of ancient Aryan literature afforded to the visible leaders of the Society by the real adept founders of the undertaking in the background, has proved of such inestimable value. An immense number of the more thoughtful classes of the Indian people have been persuaded to seek for the correspondences in their respective faiths rather than to dwell upon their discrepancies. And all philanthropists who may, for any reason, be shocked by the crude idolatry and incoherent fancies which disfigure oriental religions would do far more wisely to co-operate with the Theosophical Society, in trying to lead the imagination of the Indian people up [Page 9] from these to the primary divine truths they have so sadly caricatured, rather than to waste good effort in a lateral attack. Such an attack cannot be successfully prosecuted from the point of view of a religion which Europe has so far refined in the minds of its most gifted representatives, that these are sometimes apt to forget how it strikes an entirely unprejudiced stranger, when its cut and dried doctrines are crudely presented to him by preachers unable to illuminate their symbology as they proceed. Indeed, we may gather a higher lesson yet from the theosophic position even than that which would recommend a generous recognition of the good wrought already in India by its fraternal counsels. We may be enabled, at last, to perceive that in penetrating to the core, and partially obscured significance of our great European faith itself, with the help of the light shining from the Oriental Brotherhood, we may discern something more than a moral benefit for India in the establishment of fraternal sentiment there — something which may reveal to European philosophy that its highest triumphs can only be attained when the universal brotherhood of the Theosophical Society has truly extended its influence across both continents, and has bound together the lovers of divine wisdom in England and in Hindustan in an even closer union than that which, for the welfare of both, let us trust, will long continue to attach them in physical allegiance to one governing organisation.