

Individuality and Personality

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[Page 16] IN the study of Theosophy, which is the synthesis and ultimate issue of all Science, Philosophy and Religion, the range of subjects to be considered is so vast and far-reaching, that the mind of the student is liable to be at first dazzled, then confused, and finally a feeling of hopelessness sets in which causes him to withdraw altogether from the pursuit of the Higher Wisdom. In the face of this discouragement it is often well, instead of trying to deal at one and the same time with many new doctrines in seeming opposition to all one's former teachings, to examine some one point in detail, to become familiar with its various aspects, and finally to view it from a distance in order to observe its relation to the whole.



The neglect of this latter part of the proposition seems to be one cause why many abandon further study of the subject in impatience, and in their failure to see what good it can do, turn away in disgust at the monstrosity of the view presented. A fact, for instance, may be put forward for their observation, the truth of which they cannot well deny, but finding nothing in their too material consciousness to which it can be linked, the newly-discovered treasure falls from their grasp, as they find that they have been truly trying to "hitch their wagon on to some star", which had (to them) no existence. The fact fades from their mind like a dream, and they return to their old materialistic "grind", declaring that "all is vanity" which cannot be cognised by the animal senses.

A stranger at one of our meetings for discussion of Theosophical subjects lately, remarked that some of our arguments were very good, but why mix up with them sentimental ideas, *such as Karma*. Had he patiently examined this doctrine the gentleman would have found it to be nothing but an exposition of the fundamental natural law of cause and effect acting on human lives, and would have seen its reasonableness and its importance as a basis of Theosophical teaching. He would then probably have been led on to the consideration of other aspects of Theosophical truth, till one by one all were conquered.

Among these aspects there is none the right understanding of which is more important than the distinction between those two divisions of man's nature, called in Theosophy, the Individuality and the Personality. Without a right knowledge of all that is involved in these terms, no true system of ethics can be built up, for it is the constant tendency of mankind [Page 17] to cultivate the one at the expense of the other, and having thus destroyed the balance and harmony of Nature, he proceeds to attribute to her or to his fellow-beings, the mischievous results which he has himself brought about. The relation of the Personality to the Individuality is a little corner of the field of Theosophic study, which we may examine with profit in order to obtain a better understanding of the whole. And as analogy is useful, and since we are thinking of a field, we may without moving from the spot, lift up our eyes, and notice the tree whose leaves are beginning to fall. One by one they fade, and as the sap, the vital principle, is withdrawn from

their cells, they drop off and die; they are trodden into the soil beneath, their tissues disintegrate, their gases are dispersed in the atmosphere, they are gone into the "grave of things". Will they return again? no, not with the same bodies, but the tree will clothe itself anew with other leaves which it will feed and inform with the sap, the vital principle that is stored up within itself, and which proceeds from the One Life which animates all Nature. Year after year this process is continued, and yet the tree remains always the same individual oak tree, or lime, or cedar, distinct not only from every other species, but even from every other tree of the same species. It is only by these continual changes and renewed lives that the tree attains its full development. The leaves are not meant for its adornment only, nor for the mere shelter of birds, nor to make glad the heart of man, but they are the means towards a fuller life in the tree itself. They are its breathing apparatus, and as they lift up their surface towards the sunlight, they draw in through a thousand pores the elements which are transmitted in their chemical laboratory into that colouring matter which gives such beauty to the forest and the garden, but which has its primary use in the economy of the tree itself. If the leaves are attacked by blight or grubs, and do not properly perform this function, the tree will remain stunted, and make no growth during that particular year; another year, however, they may shoot forth with vigour, and the tree will increase in height and girth, and add to its permanent live stock, to its individuality as a tree. Without carrying our analogy too far, we may liken our personality to the leaves of the tree. It is the garb which our individuality, our incarnating Ego, dons for each life as the most appropriate expression of its actual state and needs. Certain physical traits will doubtless be due to heredity, but even these often become modified or disappear as the character develops, and the real self comes to the front. Now, the error of the ordinary human being, especially one under the influence of the prevalent materialism, is to mistake the personality for the real man, whereas it is but as the clothes of the actor, appropriate to the part he has to play. "Each man in his time plays many parts", is true [Page 18] even in our sense, whether Shakespeare intended it so or not, "each man", standing for the *real* Ego, and "many parts" for successive lives or personalities. The doctrine of Reincarnation, in itself a wide subject for study, is inseparably bound up with that of the Individuality and personality, as well as that of Karma, which determines the course of the Ego throughout its various lives. But on that we need not dwell just now. The personality being, to the uninstructed eye, more discernible than the individuality, men are apt to make it the object of their whole attention their striving and their love. They work for its welfare in life, exhausting their best energies in its behalf, and when it dies, they mourn for its outer shell with excess of grief, tending with infinite care the grave which holds it, though its component parts remain even there but a short time in cohesion. Christians say of course that the "spirit returns to God who gave it", but they do not generally behave as though this were their living belief. Even the religious man's ideas are sorely tinged with a scepticism he dares not admit in words. It is because he does not understand the true relation of the personality to the individuality.

Let us try to define more exactly what is meant by those two words: Theosophy teaches that man's nature is sevenfold, the three higher parts constituting his spiritual and imperishable, the four lower his material and perishable nature. These two divisions are linked together during life by the fifth principle, the Manas or Ego, which on the one side is immersed in the matter in the lower quaternary, and on the other side aspires upward to the Divine. Mathematically it may be represented, the higher triad by an

equilateral triangle:  the lower quaternary by a square:  Placing one over the other the Manas or Ego may be conceived of as a double triangle uniting and intersecting the two with one point turned downwards, the other heavenwards, thus: The lower quaternary furnishes to the Manas a personality



which is perishable and variable, and is but the "flowing vestment of an unchanging reality". But, says the sceptic, of what use is life on earth? Is it not the materialist argument that man's life is blotted out and leaves no trace, and that even what is called his higher nature perishes with the physical brain? Just so; but then the materialist recognises only the personality,

holding that for the entire man, and ignoring that which Theosophy understands by the Higher Self, the Immortal Ego, the [Page 19] Individuated Spirit. And how do we think that pure spirit, which has neither form nor parts nor differentiation, can become an Individual ? Theosophy answers: By its descent into matter, by its conjunction with the human consciousness, which, without its presence, would be scarcely a degree above that of the higher animals.

The question most frequently asked in these days is this: "Is life worth living?" The answers are various, but are mostly tinged with pessimism. The political economist tells us that the end of man's being is happiness, the greatest happiness of the greatest number; but in the face of the rampant misery of the many, he can scarcely believe even his own panaceas for their abatement, and his so-called science is becoming as much discredited as theology itself. Now what does Theosophy answer to this question ? It tells us that life on earth is only a phase in the evolution of the individual by means of the struggle with matter, and of the specific experience gained through a material personality. It does not teach that life or happiness is an end in itself, although right living in, in each successive stage of existence does induce that harmonious condition which may be called happiness. But it is at best only a fleeting state, for as soon as the higher stages of consciousness are reached, happiness can only be attained in living for the higher by the complete conquest of the lower, a life which connotes both struggle and sadness — struggle with the lower principles which, if they get the upper hand, drag man downwards, and sadness at the sight of so many who cannot be convinced of the necessity for the upward striving. The Christ must, of necessity, be also the Man of Sorrows, he must bear the cross not only for himself but for others. Well did Jesus teach that man must lose his life for his sake (the Christos) ere he can find it; in other words, the riot of the personal must give way to the grave footsteps of the divine in man. The two cannot co-exist except in the due subordination of the one to the other, the lower must minister to the higher. And by this it is not meant that the personality is to be starved, or that ascetism, as ordinarily understood, is to be practised. The personality has a work to perform, and the body must be maintained in a state of efficiency for action. But the personality is much more than the mere physical body. It embraces the affections with all their multiform activities for good and for evil, the intellectual faculties and their potentialities, it is concerned in all the relations of social life, it is concerned with the whole sphere of human duties. Each one of us in his place has to work out his salvation by means of his personality. And in accordance with the use we make of our opportunities will be the future we prepare for ourselves, so that, though, on the one hand, our position here is the result of causes formerly set in motion by us, we are, on the [Page 20] other hand, creating fresh causes, the effects of which may reach us in this life, or may be postponed to some future existence. If we realized this to the utmost, there would be no room for that discontent with our surroundings which is so rife in the present day; the thought expressed by the religious poet is correct:

Thou cam'st not to thy place by accident,
It is the very place God meant for thee.

St. Paul says somewhere: "Art thou a slave, care not for it". It is of very little importance into what position we are born, the only important thing is that we should learn what lesson we can from it, do the duty that lies nearest to us, and try to teach others, by our sympathy, to do the same, bearing one another's burdens where we can, and thus fulfil the law of Christ. Those who hold positions of great influence in the world, can work for others on a larger scale, but their work will not be more blessed than the cup of cold water given by unselfish love. Our personal surroundings are the channels for the stream of activities which go to make up what we call our life here; the true function of the personality is to gather such materials as our experience affords for the building up of a character, an individuality which shall

endure when the personality, after due service rendered, shall return to the elements, leaving behind only the impress of its unselfish deeds, its truly noble acts of love and self-denial to be incorporated with the immortal Ego by which those acts were inspired. And thus " he that loseth his life shall find it", nothing of good shall die, nothing of high and pure.

What we want is to separate in our daily life the chaff of that which pertains merely to the personal or lower self, from the true grain that is to fortify and build up the enduring fabric of the individual character. In the present state of society, artificial and unreal as much of it is, this cannot be done without making a decided stand in favour of the real and true. It is a step gained to recognise the position, a greater gain still to act upon our knowledge. It needs but that a few should be courageous and act up to their convictions, for there is a groaning and travailing under the superficiality from those who would gladly break through the crust if someone would strike the first blow. Only by the due proportions being kept between the upper and the lower parts of man's nature, by training the personality to be the handmaid of the Higher Self, can man's true emancipation be effected. It is not for another to prescribe the details; each one must work out the problem for himself by the study of the Divine Wisdom —THEOSOPHIA,