

Karma and Sentiment

by Anonymous (Alexander Fullerton)

Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 4

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

THEOSOPHY encounters a good many oppositions in its course, not all of them factious or bigoted. It is inevitable that any system of thought which contradicts the thought generally held, especially if on subjects peculiarly sacred and cherished, should excite much antagonism and some bitterness. Nothing is more dear to men than their religious beliefs, and any deliberate attempt to discredit, much more to uproot, them is particularly exasperating because profane. That Theosophy should wake up the so-called "religious world" to a very indignant and hostile onslaught is, therefore, precisely what one would anticipate. If there was mere question as to a new colouring of a theological dogma, or to the dropping of a rail or two from an ecclesiastical fence, some little languid feeling might arise, soon, however, subsiding as the mind became accustomed to it. But the case is very different when carefully braced creeds are wrenched apart and the very foundations of doctrine undermined preparatory to being blown up, when the libraries of patristic and controversial literature are tumbled into the mire, when the very Churches are dismantled and their most sacred symbols appropriated by the invader. Cries of rage and wrath and resistance are of course. No one need wonder at invectives upon sacrilege, or at prophecies of retribution.

It would be a great error, however, if all this was accounted for as bigoted conservatism or ecclesiastical self-interest. There is perhaps no doctrine which has not at its core a germ of truth. The life of a tree is not in its branches or its leaves, or even its trunk, but in its root, and the vitality of the most revolting creeds comes from some radical fact, but for which there never could have been any growth or any endurance. It may be misinterpreted, exaggerated, stated in a form hideous to reason and morals, but in its last analysis it has an element of truth. The fair man admits this, as he admits any other reality, and then seeks some method by which it may be justly recognized, given its place and function in a system.

One such element, a very potent one, is sentiment. Religion is not merely a philosophy, and a philosophy will not successfully supplant a religion. Theosophy itself is sagely called "The Wisdom Religion". If it was only a higher form of Science, dealing in broader fields and with finer tools, it would have attraction only for the scientific. If it was a mere Philosophy of Life, it would reach the thoughtful, but would have no general interest and no general applicability. It is, indeed, all this, but it is also "The Wisdom Religion", the religion which knows whereof it affirms, and, because knowing, gives wise outlet to those aspirations and motions which are connected by the term "religion". Religion having its [Page 4] exercise in the sphere of emotion, Theosophy, like the others, gives full value to sentiment, but, unlike the others, furnished sentiment with a rational grounding.

We find, when we probe into the cause for so much conventional bitterness towards Theosophy, that not a little is from wounded sentiment. The greatest problem in life is evil, and the greatest interest is how to treat it. In the department of religion evil takes the name of "sin," and religion, being largely of emotional

fabric, regards sin as a matter for emotional treatment. This is partly in the case of repentance and absolution, but still more in provision by which penalties may be escaped. If you analyze the various schemes adopted by different cults, you will find that they resolve themselves into three, all of them varieties of the principle of substitution. There is the substitution of some other service for that in which the offender failed. Not a few Abbeys or ecclesiastical institutions in Europe were built by robber Barons to propitiate Heaven for lives of outrage and carouse, it being supposed that stolen money, valueless to the thief because of approaching death, would be gratefully accepted as a legacy by Almighty God, and the boon of Paradise conferred in return. There is the substitution of some other penalty than that incurred by the offender. This is the rationale of the system of penances and of fines, so elaborated among the ancient Hebrews that moral obliquities had a graduated scale of values ranging from a pigeon to an ox. There is the substitution of some other victim than the offender himself. Boys were whipped to death on Athenian altars to stay the anger of Diana; hecatombs of animals and of men have been sacrificed in various lands to avert punishment for wrong; and in the so-called "Christian" faith the central idea is a vicarious atonement by which the morally-guilty can transfer his suffering to the morally-innocent, and the morally-innocent transfer his character to the morally-guilty. Even where the leading purpose was not the escape of penalty, there was always the idea of Divine forgiveness. It is this which has inspired so much of Art and Poetry, and which has invested with such perennial tenderness the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the story of the Magdalen. In the depth of human nature there is a feeling very responsive to this note, and the thought of an Infinite pity bending over a sorrowing soul and then forever obliterating the record of its misdeeds is not one at which the devout can frown or the judicious scoff.

But this is, it must be, the thought which Theosophy as a system of fact can never accept. That Theosophy is not heartless we shall see, but that it is unflinching in its assertion of the great Law of Cause and Effect admits of no doubt. Karma means the cancellation of every substitutionary invention, of every device for escaping unpaid debt, of every forgiveness [Page 5] unearned and undeserved. It will not even allow tears as expiation or penitence as acquittal. The law of the conservation of force, it claims, is as inflexible in the moral as in the physical area; wrong must work itself out, expend its strength, be annulled by a contrary exertion. Permanent justice restrains a transient pity, and enduring interests stretch sympathy from an individual to a universe.

Thus we see how inevitably our teachings come in conflict with one of the deepest feelings of the human heart. We are surrounded, too, by a religion which has brought that feeling to the surface and given it the freest play. When we speak of Karma, the relentless Law which knows no commutation and no pardon, the whole sentimental instinct rises in protest. "You would take away", it says, "the very sweetest quality in the Divine character. You would abolish the hope of the thief on the cross, the penitent Peter, and the mourning Magdalen. You would make the Supreme Being less placable than the Christ who has displayed Him, and expel compassion from the very quarter where we see it most. You not only deprive us of a Saviour; you make salvation itself impossible. You exhaust religion of its essential attribute and commend the desiccated shell as life-imparting, supposing that men will accept what has lost its supreme attraction and be consoled by a doctrine which has been emptied of consolation. If a religion without religiousness is a contradiction, one without pardon is a monstrosity".

I can perfectly well see how this is precisely the impression which Karma must make on a mind habituated to usual Christian thought. That it is not just or accurate or true is demonstrable, but that it is inevitable is not less so. And that it must operate to repel further investigation, unless corrected, is

equally clear. If Theosophy is to become influential among the masses, not merely the property of a few highly-trained or dispassionately formed spirits, but a real conviction of men at large, it must meet this objection of a want of sentiment, and must supply the needs of human nature as that nature exists. I believe that this can be done, and that a true conception will sustain humanity as no purely emotional idea ever may or ever could.

First, then, we have to notice that any other theory than the Karmic only meets one side of sentiment. It concerns itself wholly with the desires of the offender. But there are several other sides. There is the feeling of justice in the offender himself. It is pleasant to escape pain which one deserves, but in all save lowest natures there must remain an uncomfortable suspicion that one is getting that to which one has no right, and this of itself is a pain, so that the very immunity is but partial. And as this suspicion could never die out, that form of pain would last longer than any direct discipline. I suppose that the only effectual way of securing perfect [Page 6] mental relief is by expiation of fault through punishment. The blessed saints whom Theology depicts as crowned and robed and harping through pure grace must experience, one would say, a disagreeable consciousness of being where they have no right, and of an environment and paraphernalia not wholly, in keeping with desert. This would in time make Paradise intolerable. Then there is the feeling of justice in others. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is very beautiful, but his elder brother was quite just in his complaint, that all the merry-making was bestowed on the ill-behaved who had squandered half the property; and I fancy that readers not twisted into supposed reverence really sympathize with the moral and industrious son who was not summoned to the feast but heard of it casually from a servant. Then there is the feeling in the wronged of what is due *them*. Pity for evil-doers is too often at the expense of those to whom the evil is done. Yet their sobs and groans and sorrows cry aloud for retribution. If the victim of a violence saw his assailant promptly forgiven and released, he himself suffering on and on from his undeserved wounds, could he view with any complacency a system thus resulting? And are not his sentiments worthy to be considered? It seems, then, that any administration of moral affairs which pardons upon penitence and without punishment really violates sentiment all around, — in the offender, the victim, and the onlookers.

In the second place, any un-Karmic theory is extremely narrow in its field of vision. It shuts out all the rest of living Nature, ignores society, mankind, the vital universe, and takes note only of the individual before it. But Nature is not so constituted. In the intricate net in which we are all interwoven, no force impinging on one part is unfelt elsewhere, but really transmits its influence along every fibre. If therefore you apply a force here and there, you are applying it unequally, discordant vibrations are set up, and confusion spreads in every direction. It is not too much to say that a moral universe conducted by the sentimentalists would very soon be a moral chaos. For if you once admit the principle that moral actions may have some other result than their normal ones, you introduce just such a disintegrating force and ensure just such a disintegrated effect. Instead of the healthfulness and cheer called for by the emotional theory, comes a general ruin to universal interests, and the concession to sentiment brings about the very gloom which sentiment deprecates.

In the third place, every un-Karmic theory is defective in its appliances for cure. The supposition that evil is to be rooted out of a human soul by the mere contemplation of good, or through gratitude for having been spared the due award for what it has done of bad, is not sustained by reason or history. We do not learn by gazing at abstractions, but by experiencing realities. If we do not so learn, the attempt must always be [Page 7] futile, and to substitute a palpably futile plan for one effective would not only be unwise, it would be unkind. And here again the sentimental impulse would defeat its own end, and the

result would be permanent misery instead of temporary discipline.

The doctrine of Karma, though it may shock at first as heartless and unmerciful, is truly the embodiment of the most far-seeing compassion. For the purpose of Karma is to remove the cause of evil and so the consequences of evil, to extirpate the disease, not to salve it. By steadily forcing home to the mind a certainty that good produces always good and wrong always sorrow, it finally detaches from a policy which is seen to be hopeless. Its conspicuous merit is undoubtedly its justice, — we reap that, and that only, which we have sown. But its mercy is no less real. Discarding all processes which would distract from the one purpose of cure to the diseased, it applies itself continuously and straight-forwardly thereto. Perfectly impartial, never swerving from absolute rectitude, it uses the disciplinary function only for a remedial end, and never rests till its subject is in unblemished health. When he reaches paradise, it is because he belongs there. If he wears kingly robes or aureoles of glory, it is because they fit him and appertain to him. He has no uneasy discomfort, for he has been trained for the place and the function. And we can well believe that any participant in emancipation, whatever may be his present grade, must attribute his success to Karma, that just yet tender guide which would not listen to whimperings or hesitate under prayers, but sternly pushed into the right road and smiled only when it was kept.

But more than in any anti-Karmic system, grandly, copiously, voluminously more, does Theosophy throw open the way to the broadest sentiment. Its whole purport is altruism, the most unselfish beneficence. It does not pity only a moral offender here and there, but the great human family, afflicted with ills, sad at heart, needing the balm of a universal sympathy. Nothing is so cramping as self-love, and Theosophy will have none of it. If any theological system compassionates a sufferer, this far more. If any religion claims the merit of offering peace to troubled souls, Theosophy has the greater merit of never resting till every troubled soul feels peace. Sentiment, mercy, good-will? Why the whole system is redolent of it! It is the very essence of all that Buddha and Jesus and Zarathustra preached, the uniform mark of all their true followers then and now. The abolition of selfishness, the omnipresence of love, — this is what is meant by the Theosophic spirit. He who would base his religion on sentiment will find no other basis so broad as Theosophy: he who would make his religion consist in a world-wide tenderness may give it another name, but he is really preaching ours.