

The Nature of Theosophical Proofs by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] THE man who avows himself a Theosophist, and who speaks to others of Theosophy, is constantly met with the question: "What proof is there that your ideas are true ? May they not be mere fancies, beautiful but baseless ? Why should a man accept them who is not willing to be deceived even by his longing to be convinced, and who would rather live in the darkness than follow a will-o'-the-wisp ? " It may be worth while to see the nature of the proofs that may be submitted to indicate the way which leads to conviction.

People who ask for proofs often overlook the fact that the nature of the proof must vary with the nature of that which is to be proved, and that the more complex the subject the more complex will be the proof. A fact, a law, a far-reaching theory, the existence of a distant country, cannot all be proved in the same way. A simple isolated fact, such as the composition of water, may be proved to the satisfaction of an onlooker by simple and direct experiments, either of analysis or synthesis. If we assert that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, we can bring the two gases together and unite them, producing [Page 2] water. Most people who see such an experiment would be convinced by it, without asking for any proof that the apparently empty tube is filled with hydrogen and oxygen, and without considering that even this simple proof could not be given by a man unprovided with special apparatus — not only the apparatus in which the water is produced, but also other apparatus whereby hydrogen and oxygen are prepared and isolated, to say nothing of the long process of study by which apparatus and materials were invented, discovered and prepared. All these preceding and necessary stages, due to the labour of generations of experts, are accepted on authority by "the plain man", and he takes the last bit of proof as the whole, and is therewith satisfied. Thus imperfect is the proof of even a very simple physical fact.

But when we come to the proving of a law of nature, say of the velocity of falling bodies, or even of such facts as the turning of the earth on its own axis, or the distance of a star from the earth, we find that a course of study is needed before the proof can be appreciated, and the spectator cannot understand the proof unless he has passed through this course. The "plain man" is here hopelessly at sea, although experiments may be performed before his eyes.

When we seek for proofs of a far-reaching theory, such as that of evolution, study looms ever larger, while experiment ever diminishes. Scattered facts must be observed, grouped, correlated, and induction replaces experiment. Experiment yields only the facts from [Page 3] which the theory is induced, and the proof lies in a chain of reasoning forcible only to the student. Direct proofs of evolution are unavailable; no man can produce them on a platform and set them before the eyes of his audience. The reason must be developed before the cogency of the proofs can be appreciated. More and more as we depart from the region of simple physical facts is the inner development of the student a factor in the appreciation of the proofs.

Lastly, in such cases as the existence of a distant country, the only proof available for the majority is

human testimony, the evidence of those who have visited it. No direct proof can be offered to the non-traveller; those who have been there say that the country exists, and assert that if others travel by the same road they will arrive in the country in due course. It may be so, but there is no proof, either logical or experimental, for those who have not been there. They can accept the testimony of others, if they please; nothing else is available.

Now Theosophy is an exposition of life, including in one vast sweep all its actualities and possibilities, a synthesis of existence as manifested in space and time. It can only be grasped, even to a very limited extent, by prolonged and patient study, and its proofs are, necessarily, available for the student only. Some of its teachings, indeed, may be severally proved, such as the continuity of consciousness on this and the other side of death. For such a definite fact proof can be produced by the methods followed [Page 4] respectively by the occultist and the spiritualist, and we will return later to facts of this nature. But Theosophy as a whole cannot be proved by direct evidence, as if it were the assertion of a single fact. As the student grasps its teachings the conviction of their truth gradually establishes itself in his mind, and as they illumine the past and the present he finds himself working by their light rather than asking whether they are light. He knows that he sees by them where before he was in darkness, understands where before he was perplexed. In fact, Truth does not need to be proved, it only needs to be seen; for the intelligence is correlated to it as the eye to the light-waves. "This I know, that whereas I was blind now I see" — such is the witness of the Theosophical student, and it is this which gives to him his steadfastness of conviction. He finds himself developing faculty, not merely acquiring knowledge; he is conscious of definite intellectual growth, not merely of an increased store of opinions. The expansion of consciousness that he experiences is not rendered to him more sure by argument nor less sure by challenge; it is an increased power in those primary assertions of consciousness which transcend all proofs — "I am, I feel, I know". In this expanding consciousness, this increasing life, this inner growth, lies his certitude, and not in any external phenomenon, in any chain of reasoning.

What we need then is not so much the proofs of Theosophy, as the proofs that there is something worth studying which goes by this name; we want [Page 5] to induce people to study, and to this end to present to them a case sufficiently strong and sufficiently promising to induce them to devote time and trouble to its investigation. Those of us who know something of what Theosophy brings of light to life and thought, owe nothing less than this to our fellows, who as yet know it not; more than this we cannot really do, for everyone must see in the light with his own eyes, if he would see at all. We will take then:

- 1) Proofs of the existence of a primeval "Wisdom".
- 2) Proofs of isolated teachings.
- 3) The only full proof of spiritual Realities.

1) PROOFS OF THE EXISTENCE OF A PRIMEVAL "WISDOM"

These proofs are to be gathered by a careful study of the past, and may be grouped under the following heads:

1. Identity of
 - (a) religious doctrines,
 - (b) ethics,

(c) histories,
(d) symbols,
in all the religions of the world.

2. Existence of divine Men.

3. Existence and universality of the "Mysteries".

1. On the fact of the identity of religious doctrines, ethics, histories and symbols in all the religions of the world there is no dispute among educated people. A century ago the fact might have been challenged, but the work done during the last [Page 6] hundred years by the students of oriental tongues, of archaeology, of folklore, has placed it beyond dispute among the instructed.

(a) To take first the religions. This identity is not only found between the religions of highly civilised peoples, where a great literature has grown up, establishing it, as it were, by chapter and verse; but scientific travellers and observers have proved it to exist even in the religions of non-civilised races. The more the myths of such peoples are studied the more startlingly emerges the fact that their present beliefs are degraded descendants of noble and lofty ideas, the ideas found in their primitive beauty and sublimity in ancient literature preserved in other lands. However great may be the superficial difference between religions, however far they may appear to be removed from each other, however much this one may have lost or that one may have added, a common basis is still observable. Of the existence of this basis there is no doubt, the doubt arises only as to its nature. Is the common basis a primeval ignorance, all the sublime ideas appearing in later times as a product of the evolution of intelligence ? or is the common basis a primeval knowledge, possessed by beings evolved far beyond primitive humanity and imparted to the latter by way of education, with a view to the quickening of evolution ?

On the reply to this question depends the immediate future of religions — not of one religion, but of all. They must stand or fall together, for their common origin can no longer be doubted. The claim of any [Page 7] one religion to be unique is hopelessly out of court, save among the ignorant, and for one to seek to destroy another is to commit suicide in a clumsy and roundabout way. The family type is clearly marked, and to blacken one member of the family is to disgrace all. One faith can never again hope to rise on the ruins of another, nor stand in the illusive light of isolation. For good or for evil, all are branches from one stem.

The decision as to the nature of the common basis must be decided by investigation into the ideas of which it consists; if these ideas are found to be crude, coarse and irrational, and if it can be shown that such ideas passed through stages of successive refinement, to emerge at last sublime, pure and reasonable, then it will be fair to infer that primitive ignorance is the basis of religious ideas. If, on the contrary, it is found that these ideas are sublime, pure and reasonable in the early days of a religion, that they are replaced by base imitations and are over-loaded with superstitions at a later stage, and are far in advance of any present productions of the people among whom they still exist, it will be fair to infer that they originate in primitive wisdom. That there is such a basis, that it is THE WISDOM, that religions may be graded according to the fidelity with which they have preserved this basis and the prominence they give to the ideas of which it is composed — such is the statement of the student of Theosophy. The

proofs are to be sought in the Scriptures of the various, [Page 8] religions, and in the modern works recording the discoveries made by antiquarians, archaeologists, comparative mythologists, and folklorists. [As summaries of the evidences, *The Great Law*, by W. Williamson, may be taken for the more definite religions, and the *Making of Religion*, by Andrew Lang, for the beliefs of the uncivilised]. The chief ideas, traces of which should be sought for, and which may be said to form this common basis, are:

The One Existence, or the existence of One Supreme Being.
 The manifestation of God as a Trinity or Triad.
 The existence of super and sub-human beings.
 The human spirit as issuing from the divine.
 The evolution of the soul.
 The law of sequence guiding evolution.
 The perfectibility of man.
 The existence of divine Teachers, who promulgated these ideas.

These ideas, plainly and fully stated or obscurely hinted, will be found by the student among all nations and at all periods. The more he studies, the more will the proofs accumulate, until he sees the Wisdom everywhere, a "light shining in a dark-place". His eyes will be opened to see the mystic Tree, which has its roots in heaven and its branches in every land.

(b) The identity of the ethical teachings found in connection with religious ideas but strengthens the conviction reached by a study of those ideas themselves. Let any man study side by side the teachings of Jesus, the Buddha, Lao-tze, Krishna, with much [Page 9] that is found in the *Mahābhārata* under different names, and he will find that on fundamental points of morality they are at one. The duties of truth, love, forgiveness, compassion, charity, humility, fortitude, patience, resignation, are all enforced by all World-Teachers. It is obvious that They are drawing from a common source, that They are handing on, not inventing. They are not expounding the new, but are proclaiming the old. Like Jesus, most of Them tell what "I have seen with my Father", rather than speak on Their own authority. Here, again, study brings full conviction of the identity of the ethic in the world-religions, and here, as in the case of the religious ideas, we are continually impressed with the fact that the highest is the oldest, or the repetition of the oldest. In the most ancient literature the high-water mark of ethic is found; however much our humanity has evolved as a whole, her latest sons cannot parallel in their writings the moral splendour of the precepts of the World-Teachers.

(c) The identity of many of the stories of the World-Teachers forms a favourite weapon of attack in the hands of the enemies of all religions. The divine Man is ever born of a virgin, the date of His birth is in mid-winter, danger surrounds His cradle, He is a healer of diseases and a teacher of the people, He dies — often by crucifixion — at the spring equinox, He overcomes death and ascends to heaven, His life is communicated to His followers by sacraments. These identities would remain unsolved were it not that the outer lives of these great Ones are shaped by [Page 10] the soul-drama that They play with the world as stage, and are centres for the mystery-story; They outline in Their physical lives the drama of the evolution of the human soul, and the details are filled in from that same drama as shown in the Mysteries, the ancient yet ever-new story of the evolving Son of God. The hero of that great Mythos is ever changing, but it changes not itself, and each new hero wears the familiar garb.

(d) The identity of the symbols that reveal yet hide basic truths in all religions gives yet another proof of the common origin whence they flow. From unburied city, the secrets of which have long been held hidden by the faithful earth; from monuments that were old when western civilisation was still far from its birth-hour; from fresco and tile, from vessel and graven image; from America and Africa, from Italy and Chaldea, from India and China, pour forth the witnesses to the universality of the language of symbolism, the common tongue of the ancient and modern worlds. The cross in all its varied forms, each with its separate meaning; the triangle, single and double; the star of five, of six, of seven, of ten points; the sun; the crescent moon; the serpent and the hooded snake; the twisted cord; the trident; the eye; the wings; the disk; the shell — time would fail to tell the many letters, the many combinations. Those who gave the world-religions for the teaching of humanity stamped these symbols on each, that all might know the unity of their origin, and recognise in each the same ancient deposit of truths. [Page 11]

Seeing, then, these identities, whereof more and more are revealed as study deepens, the student feels an ever growing conviction of a common basis in knowledge, of the existence of THE WISDOM.

2. The existence of divine Men, or of a divine Man, is asserted in every religion, however much each religion may deny to its supposed rivals the possession of such glorious beings. "The Holy Ones" are the jewels in the crown of every world-faith, and shine out radiantly in history, the lustrous Messengers of the one White Lodge. The tradition of such beings is universal, whatever names may be given to Them — Initiate-Kings, Royal Priests, Sons of Heaven, Rshis, Demi-Gods, Heroes, Sages, Magi, Hierophants, Divine Rulers; the names are endless, but they all signify the same lofty beings. Every nation of the past, every religion, sees itself founded by these glorious Ones, looks up to Them with reverence and with pride. Has this universal tradition no basis in fact ?

The very existence of the world-Scriptures is one of the "proofs that such Men lived and wrought. These books record Their teachings, and no later Writers have penned records of such sayings as therein are found. They who spake the words that make the Bibles of the religions were men far other than those with whom They lived. Later ages have produced commentators, expounders, founders of philosophic and religious schools, but these ages are barren, so far as These are concerned, on whose sayings are written the commentaries and the expositions, and are founded the schools. Whose [Page 12] sayings stir the hearts of countless generations, sway the minds of unnumbered millions, inspire afresh succeeding ages, as full of living energy now as when they first dropped from the gracious lips, like those of Shri Krishna, of the Lord Buddha, of the Christ ? The sayings bear witness to the nature of their authors, and the divine Men are Their own credentials. Their lives are Their witnesses, Their words the pedestals on which They stand.

The ancient civilisations, with their gigantic monuments, the very ruins of which seem to defy Time himself, bear silent witness to the knowledge and the skill of their designers and builders. Those remains of Cyclopean structures were erected by no unguided savage tribes, were builded by no undirected barbarian skill. Who wrought the temples of Karnac, and reared the many stately fanes of Egypt ? Who taught a mastery of metals that modern science has not yet re-discovered, secrets of art and manufacture lost to the modern world ? Who founded the great empires of the elder worlds, that left even in their decadence such traces as those of the Mayas, the Etruscans, the Peruvians? Whose lives gave basis for Orpheus and for Hermes, for Zoroaster and for Manu?

3. And what shall we say of the Mysteries, whereto civilised antiquity bears witness with no uncertain voice ? Can those rites be treated with light scorn through which passed Solon and Pythagoras, Plato and Epicurus, Porphyry and Plotinus ? Is the testimony of the leaders of the ancient world to the value, to the sacredness, of the initiations therein given to [Page 13] be lightly waved aside, and is the easy ignorance of modern scholarship to deride as superstition the knowledge of the super-sensuous worlds alleged to be given in the Mysteries by those who in them had had the veil lifted from their eyes ? Those who would know if there be reasonable ground for believing in the existence of THE WISDOM would do well to study carefully what fragments as to the Mysteries are available in ancient writings. Let them read these, ponder over them, weigh the characters of the men who wrote of them, and who hinted at the nature of the knowledge disclosed in them.

Those who study along these lines will find themselves led inevitably to the conclusion that there was a WISDOM, and if it ever existed it cannot have perished, for the WISDOM was ever with its Guardians, the MASTERS OF WISDOM. Thus may be established the reasonable case which justifies further search, farther efforts, for so far we have only shown that there is something to study. If it be objected that proofs of this nature cannot be found without labour, without perseverance, without effort, the answer is plain and clear. Those who will not thus work must be content to do without belief, or to believe on authority. Sure knowledge is not for those who would possess all while doing nothing, who would reap the harvest but not sow the seed.

2) PROOFS OF ISOLATED TEACHINGS

The proofs of separate facts contained in Theosophical teachings are in some cases indirect and depending [Page 14] on study, in others direct and readily available. We may take the doctrine of reincarnation as an instance, and consider the nature of the proofs that may be adduced in its support.

One class of these proofs is similar to a class brought forward in support of physical evolution — a mass of observed facts, which only become intelligible on the basis of reincarnation, constituting reincarnation the most reasonable hypothesis of those which occupy the field.

There are three possible hypotheses which may account for the existence of the human intelligence:

1. It may be created as it is seen at birth by some over-ruling Power, by God.
2. It may be the result of evolution by physical heredity.
3. It may be the result of the evolution of a continuing consciousness, taking body after body as a means of growth.

These several hypotheses must be tested by observation and by reason, and that will hold the field — at any rate until another can be suggested — which emerges from this test as the most satisfactory.

When we regard the human beings around us, we see that both in intelligence and in morality they offer all the marks that we are accustomed to consider as signs of growth. Some are highly developed, while others are immature; and between the extremes of the genius and the idiot, the saint and the villain, we see every gradation of reason and of virtue. Just as in a forest we regard trees of the same [Page 15] kind, but of all different sizes, from the tiny sprout to the huge monarch of the wood, as the results of growth, the small as younger than the large, and as we should laugh at the statement that they were all created in their present stages, although we see that they are still growing from year to year; so as we see minds and moral characters growing and developing from year to year as well as showing vast differences in "size", we put aside as incredible the statement that they were created as they are, of different sizes. If similar things are manifestly growing now, we account for difference of size by different lengths of the periods of growth, and the mind recoils from accounting for the difference of size when they first came under observation by a resort to the superfluous theory of creation. As in intelligence and morality the usual signs of growth are present, the hypothesis of a continuing consciousness is more rational than that of the sudden creation of minds showing delusive tokens of growth.

If it be suggested that the differences are due to heredity, and that while there is no continuity of consciousness, yet consciousness can be highly developed and bequeathed, as it were, to children, the answer is that the facts are against this hypothesis. If such consciousness be considered as a brain-product, then the modifications of the brain acquired by a person are not transmissible to his children, any more than he transmits to them other physical modifications, such as the presence of a superfluous limb or the absence of one lost by accident. One-armed [Page 16] men do not have one-armed children. If consciousness be not regarded as a brain-product, there can be no reason why special forms of it should be transmitted from parent to child. Further, it is generally recognised that genius is for the most part sterile, and that it appears sporadically, without regard to the level of intelligence in the family from which it borrows its fleshly vehicle. Further, genius does not appear more frequently as the general level of intelligence rises, nor has modern humanity produced any genius as lofty as some of those who have appeared in the past. The more the matter is studied, the more irreconcilable with heredity are found to be the facts. With the creation theory and the heredity theory out of court, the reincarnation theory remains as the most reasonable hypothesis.

So again to those who do not believe in chance, to those who do believe that the world is guided by Power, Wisdom and Love, reincarnation alone offers an escape from what would otherwise be the cruel and inexplicable injustices of life. The babies born with good capacities into health, affluence, and happiness contrasted with those born with bad capacities into disease, poverty and misery, offer a hopeless problem save under the reincarnation hypothesis. The more we study this aspect of the question the more overwhelming becomes the logical and moral necessity for reincarnation.

Along these and along many other related lines of investigation the student gathers facts alike from past and present, until he finds that of the three [Page 17] possible hypotheses but one, that of reincarnation, remains. (For the other lines recourse may be had to various books written on reincarnation) The continuity of consciousness becomes at last to him an indubitable fact, albeit the evidence be indirect on which his final conviction is based.

The direct proofs may be summed up under: (a) the memory of the student himself; (b) the testimony of the memory of others; (c) the record obtained by clairvoyance.

Of these (a) is final to the individual concerned. His own memory of his own past, if it be clear, direct and spontaneous, furnishes him with the most complete certainty obtainable. It is his own, like the memory of his childhood in his present life, and is a personal possession whereof none can rob him; (b) must be taken or refused according to the ordinary canons of evidence, like any other fact the proof whereof depends on human testimony. All that can be asked of the student is that he will treat it in this way, and not start — as too many do — with an inner conviction that all such testimony must be worthless, and that no amount of it, even from persons whose word on ordinary matters would be unhesitatingly accepted, could convince him that such memory was reliable or even possible. It should of course be granted to him that the amount of evidence sufficient to convince must vary with the abnormality of the fact to be established (though reincarnation is, as Huxley said, more according to the analogy of nature than against it). On the whole, [Page 18] perhaps the testimony of young children, where it can be tested, is the most satisfactory under this head. (c) Those who already believe in the possibility of superphysical clairvoyance — the fact of *physical* clairvoyance is now scarcely disputable among the educated — will be ready to weigh and analyse the value of the records of past lives obtained in this way. It is a study full of interest, and sometimes the statements of the clairvoyants may be checked and verified by having recourse to ordinary history.

The smaller question of the continuity of the individual consciousness through and beyond death is another of the facts for which proof may be adduced. There are two ways in which proofs may be obtained: one, the way of the spiritualist, in which by the help of a medium the departed individual is drawn back into contact with the physical world; the other, the way of the occultist, in which the student develops himself, until he can leave the physical body and follow the departed into the invisible world into which he has passed.

In the first of these ways great numbers of people in our own days have received satisfactory and indubitable evidence that consciousness is not destroyed by death, that the person who has passed through death has come out alive on the other side, exactly the same person as he was on this side. Those who seek proof, direct immediate proof, of this continuity of personal consciousness, without any cost to themselves of effort, self-denial and patience, may find it in this way. But in this way also, if they be [Page 19] not content with the mere fact, but desire to profit by the communication with the departed by reaching the loftier among them, they will then have to pay the price in effort, self-denial and patience, and to face a certain amount of danger.

To tread the second of these ways, the student must prepare himself for many sacrifices, unending patience, repeated bafflings, and strenuous efforts. He must follow a definite method of developing the inner life and of gaining control over its vehicles. Meditation, prolonged and rightly shaped, liberates the soul from the physical body, and enables it to pass into the regions to which by its own nature it belongs. Meditation develops the inner senses, opening and clarifying the eyes that see the worlds invisible, while purity of thought, feeling and action renders available the vehicles used by consciousness in those worlds and deprives them of the deflecting constituents which otherwise confuse and distort the objects seen.

When meditation has accomplished this part of its work the student may assure himself that consciousness does not depend on the physical body, first by his own experience of himself as a living conscious entity out of the body, and secondly by his observations of others in a condition similar to his own, and of others again who have passed through death, leaving their bodies for the last time. He can

then see, hear, converse with those reputed to be dead, and familiarise himself with the varied conditions of their continued existence; he can, as it were, live with them, [Page 20] and for ever get rid of the nightmare that "death ends all".

Such a man is in a position to add to his knowledge of the phenomenal worlds in all directions, for he comes into contact with sub-human and superhuman entities of many grades, and finds worlds stretching around him on every side, bewildering in their strangeness, confusing in their number. The "manyness" inherent in matter presses itself on him from every side, till he is wearied with the ever-changing panorama, and realises that on such lines he may be ever extending his knowledge of the transitory, but will never reach the peace of the Eternal.

That such experiences are possible is testified by countless witnesses in all ages of the world, in modern as well as in ancient times. The unity of the testimony is no less remarkable than its amount; for amid countless minor varieties of details — due to the mental prepossessions of the seers — the basic facts remain undoubted, with a wealth of minor facts all bearing an unmistakable family likeness. The Hindû and Buddhist Deva, the Christian and Mussulman Angel, may differ in the cut of their garments, in the presence or absence of wings, and in such-like details; but they are ever radiant gracious beings, of superhuman knowledge and powers, discharging similar functions, and benignantly disposed towards humanity.

Such proofs are available to those who are able and willing to undergo the necessary training, and who have the patient resoluteness which alone can [Page 21] carry them through the difficulties which obstruct their way.

3) THE ONLY FULL PROOF OF SPIRITUAL REALITIES

But experiences such as these, however beautiful and however sublime, though they were carried beyond the farthest star whose faint beam glimmers to us from the last fields of space that human eye can reach; nay, were they carried on again taking that star as starting point for the next pilgrimage, and so on and on while time and space yet stretched illimitably beyond — such experiences of the many, of the phenomenal worlds, indefinitely repeated, could never lift the veil of illusion and reveal to us the Real that is ONE. They can but prove facts, demonstrate laws, exhibit powers, but never, never can they prove the Reality that underlies the appearances, nor demonstrate the spiritual by means of the material. The Reality underlies every phenomenon and may be found as readily under the phenomena close at hand as under any far away, or that need the inner vision for the seeing. We do not touch the spiritual when we read in the astral, nor does astral or mental hearing bring us into the Heart of the Silence, the Hidden God. "Not in the sight abides His form, none may by the eye behold Him. Those who know Him dwelling in the heart" those alone know Him.

The only proof of that One who alone is real is reached by the awakening of the spirit that shares His nature. It was written in the elder days that the [Page 22] only proof of His existence is "in the belief of the soul", and far down the stream of the ages; Another said that He should be seen of "the pure in heart". The heart that is full of love responds to and thereby knows the Divine Heart that is Love; the intellect that is lucid because unpolluted by the desire-nature responds to and thereby knows the Universal Mind

that is Light; the existence that is in separate responds to and thereby knows the Eternal Existence that is One. We only know that to which we can answer. Useless to show the light to eyes that are blind, that cannot vibrate in rhythm to its wavelets; useless to show the spiritual to the vision that is material, to pour love, light, unity on the hating, the dark, the separate, with the hope that they will at once respond. Love must be poured on them till they too love, light till they too shine, unity till they too are inseparate; then, but then only, shall they see the Love, the Light, the One.