

The Work of Theosophy in the World

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Delivered at Queen's Hall, London, W., on 7th July, 1905

Published in 1905

Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

The word "Theosophy" has become fairly familiar of late years, but still from time to time one notices that those who do not concern themselves much with the currents of thought in the modern world have the most curious notices of what is covered by that word. You may meet a man who will say: "Oh, Theosophy, it is some sort of table-turning, I believe"; or another, who will say; "Oh, yes, I think it is Spiritualism"; or another, that it is Mental Science, or Christian Science, or the School of New Thought, and so on. Comparatively few have a definite, clear-cut idea of what is covered by this word "Theosophy". And yet it is no new word in the history of philosophy. It is a word which has been used for many hundreds of years, a word that you come across continually if you study the mystic literature of the Middle Ages, a word that you meet from time to time further back among writers in Greek and Roman times. Still further back you may trace it, going over Eastwards, towards the source of the great religions. Truly, as the language changes the word itself changes, but translate both terms into English and you have identically the same words. For, tracing it back across Asia Minor into India, and China, you find the same thing described under the same name, although in another tongue.

An on this there is an old story in a very ancient book ["Mundakonapishat", I,i. 3-5]. The son of Shanaka, the great householder, approached, according to the rite, Angiras, and said; "Who is it, O venerable, by knowing whom all this becomes known?" And the sage answered: "Two [Page 4] sciences must be known, the knowers of Brahman tell us, the Supreme and the Lower Science." The Lower Science comprises the *Rik, Yajur, Sâma, and Atharva Vedas* - meaning generally all the sacred and revealed scriptures; also ritual, grammar, astronomy, and so on - meaning all sciences. The Supreme Science is that knowledge by which the Indestructible is understood. So runs the ancient tale. And in that latter phrase: "that by which the Indestructible, the Eternal, is understood: you have Theosophy, under its Samskrit name of Brahma-Vidyâ. Through all history and all philosophy, in Greece and Rome, in Egypt, in Middle Ages Europe, in India, always the same idea is connected with this word, and that idea is the direct knowledge of God, and therefore of the invisible worlds. That is the historical meaning of this great word. Everything else is secondary, conclusions from this great premiss. It is the assertion that man can know God directly, and can therefore know Nature directly - not only physical but superphysical nature - and know it by the same means that Science uses. I summarise it as the knowledge of God and Nature, because that includes in a single sentence the knowledge of all that can be known; and it asserts that That, which some modern philosophy has declared to be unknowable, is as much the heritage of human knowledge as any observations that science may make, as any deductions that philosophy may create. That which is denied by the Agnostic is affirmed by the Theosophist. It is the Gnosis of early Christians and Neo-Platonic times, the Brahma-Vidyâ of the Hindu.

From that supreme principle flow other deductions. God is to be known by consciousness, which is in its essence identical with Himself. Human consciousness is the bud of which the open flower is God. All powers are hidden within the human consciousness, and are capable of gradual unfoldment. And

inasmuch as only this direct knowledge can give absolute certainty of the Divine Existence, therefore, again, it is written in a very ancient [Page 5] writing that the only proof of the existence of God is in the conviction in the human Spirit. All other proofs fail of absolute demonstration. Only the Spirit can know the Source whence it has flowed.

Now with that inevitably comes the direct knowledge of Nature, physical and superphysical. I make the distinction because it is made by all around me, although truly distinction there is none. Consciousness knowing the Supreme Consciousness is knowledge of one kind; knowledge of the physical, astral, mental, or of the worlds beyond is knowledge of another kind, of the phenomenal, and the phenomena is in stages, differing in degree but not in kind. This knowledge of Nature, visible and invisible, reaches the consciousness through the sense-garment in which it is clothed. That sense-garment is more complex than many think, and senses subtler in their nature lie behind the physical senses. But always the consciousness through the sense-garment knows by observation; if through the physical part thereof, by observation of the physical world; in the next layer of that sense-garment the consciousness comes into touch with the astral world, the world of the dream-consciousness, the sub-conscious of the New Psychology. Call it, if you like, the world on the other side of death; for the world on the other side of death is certainly included therein, although there is no world which is exclusively a world on the other side of death, for that world may be entered ere the physical body is shaken off. It sounds startling in modern ears if it is stated that it is as possible for men of the twentieth century to enter that other world as it was possible for the teachers of Christianity, of Islam, of Buddhism or of Hinduism in the elder days. And yet it would seem a natural thing that what man could know at one age he can also know at another. In the old days how common was the declaration that men could know the world invisible. Some men came to the Buddha when he was teaching upon earth some five centuries before the coming of the Christ, and they asked him about the [Page 6] worlds into which, as their religion taught them, men went on the other side of death. And the Buddha answered plainly and simply: "If you want to know the way to a village you go to a man who has lived there, and who knows the road because he has often trodden it. And so, if you would know of the worlds beyond death you do well in coming to me, for I know those worlds and have oft-times trodden the way." So he spake in the elder days, and so ought the teachers of religion to be able to speak today; for they should speak by knowledge and not by hearsay. It is no new and strange thing, then, when the Theosophist says that man may travel into worlds that to most people are on the other side of death. For every one of you possesses in the sense-garment that deeper layer of subtler matter which makes you free of those subtler worlds, and it is only the ignorance of the super-physical that shuts you out from a knowledge that might rob death of its terrors, and make the passage thither a passage of joy instead of grief. And that sense-garment has not only the physical and astral layers, but also that layer of matter which belongs to the worlds beyond the astral — the heaven-worlds. And it seems as though, along the lines of study of the New Psychology, men were beginning to recognise the existence in consciousness of more worlds than one. For whence the numerous premonitions, warnings, dreams, apparitions, phantoms of the living, and those strange prophecies which are realised from time to time? Whence the vision that sees beyond the physical, if only in the hypnotic trance? Whence the hearing with keener hearing than the physical? Whence all these strange phenomena, if it be not that what is called the subconscious is largely the super-conscious — consciousness beginning to utilize a subtler vehicle, that vehicle evolving as the physical vehicle has evolved in the past? And all that view of the super-physical grows out of this thought that man can know directly God and Nature, and that in his sense-garment he has gathered together matter from all the different worlds that surround him, and [Page 7] through that veil of matter he can contact worlds other than the physical.

This is the first great work of Theosophy in the world — to proclaim the actuality of such knowledge, now

as well as in the past. It is not the proclamation of a creed. It does not rest on books, however sacred; it does not rest on tradition, however hoary; it does not rest on authority, however dignified; it rests alone on human experience of the eldest and of the present days. It is not a creed; it is a method. It is not a collection of doctrines, but an attitude towards life — the attitude of the man who deliberately, consciously evolves himself, who, instead of waiting for the slow evolution of nature, works for his own self-unfolding, recognises within himself powers divine, and faces life with the determination to use it for the unfolding of those powers, and to know himself consciously a citizen of more worlds than one.

Basing religion thus on human experience, the facts gathered by that experience form a certain body of teachings like any other science. You collect a number of facts and put them together as the science of chemistry, and another number as the science of electricity, while facts of the spiritual consciousness form the essential body of religious teachings. But we assert that these facts may constantly be reverified by everyone who follows that conscious self-evolution of which I have just spoken. Now these facts, discovered by human experience and reverified thereby, lie at the root of every great religion. They are not in consciousness because religion has revealed them; they are the foundation of religion because human consciousness has discovered them. That is the difference of position between the Theosophist and many believers in the various religions of the world. Those main facts are — I but recite them — the Unity of the One Life whence all lives are drawn; the revelation of that life in any world system as a Trinity; the existence of countless hosts of non-human intelligences who have to [Page 8] do with the working out of the laws of Nature in every world, and the guidance of the destinies of humanities in the many worlds; man himself as one rank in that great hierarchy, unfolding the Spirit within him; this by repeated sojourns in the three worlds, earth, the world beyond, and the heavenly world — Re-incarnation; and that carried on under a changeless law, Karma, in which every cause created by desire and thought and action brings about certain effects, in their turn again becoming causes; so that in this great scheme of changeless law the human consciousness evolves from step to step, beginning its climbing as the lowest mineral, and never ending it till it reaches the all-embracing force of the consciousness we call Divine.

In all religions these doctrines are found. There is nothing new. Whether in the East, to the Hindu or the Buddhist; whether in the West, to the Christian, or, midway between the two, to the child of Islam, we bring nothing that is new to the great religions of the world. Sometimes one part of the teaching has slipped out of sight. Then is it the task of Theosophy to restore what has been forgotten. But more than that. Many of these truths are hidden in such great jungles of literature that the impatient modern mind can scarce find them in the elder teaching. Take that doctrine of re-incarnation. It is not taught in Hindu scriptures in the way you teach a scientific doctrine in one of the text books of your universities, but by hints here, allusions there, suggestions in another place, everywhere scattered over the vast surface of that great literature. But it makes no impression thus taught on the modern mind. Come nearer home, to the literature of Greece and take the teachings of Plato. It is well known that he teaches there the same doctrine; but when Jowett deals with Plato, does he deal with the doctrine of Re-incarnation as a doctrine that the modern mind would for a moment look upon as worthy to be considered? On the contrary, he throws it aside with others as the strange superstitions which clouded a mighty [Page 9] mind. Re-incarnation passed unheeded by the modern world of thought, though always embedded in familiar literature, but during the last thirty years, since Theosophy has been teaching it up and down the world, how changed is its position! It is now being discussed as a rational hypothesis, as a possible key to the problems of life and evolution. We find a modern philosopher like Professor McTaggart taking this doctrine among the doctrines of immortality and declaring, as Hume had declared before him, that it is the only doctrine that offers a reasonable view of immortality; and I find that at the next Church Congress, in Weymouth, Archdeacon Colley is going to lecture on Re-incarnation. So that it is finding its way pretty

definitely within the English Church itself.

Now I do not claim that, as though Theosophy had invented the doctrine; but I do say it has made it real and actual to the modern world, as a theory to be studied instead of a superstition to be derided; and what it has done in that case it is doing for many another long-forgotten truth, every one of which is in the Wisdom of the Ancients. And that is another part of the work of Theosophy in the world — to bring the old jewels again into sight, and clear away from them the dust of ages.

Let us pass from that and see its next step: the declaration of practical methods whereby man may evolve himself and unfold his consciousness. Now in all the religions one way has been taught; and I would not say anything against that way, for many saintly feet have trodden it, and reached the goal they sought. It is the way of prayer. Prayer is a mightier force in the world than modern thinkers are inclined to admit, although the ever-increasing recognition of the energy of thought by Psychology lends a new support to the old religious doctrine of prayer. But to that method we add another. Prayer is the method for the devotional temperament; but for the more purely intellectual nature, for the man who demands to know and not only to feel, there is [Page 10] another road, the road of intense concentration of the mind, of deep, profound, and strenuous meditation, which, by intensifying the force of consciousness, enables it to transcend the garment of the senses and to know itself to exist in higher worlds than this. Those who do not care to pray may think themselves into the higher consciousness. The goal is the same, whether by prayer or concentration, the road differing according to the temperament of the one who seeks to tread it.

But along these roads you will see we have no conflict with any religion; for all religions use prayer, and the more philosophic use concentration and meditation as well. We do not strive at any time to make one convert from any faith. On the contrary, we advise people to stay in the religion which suits them best, and that is generally the religion into which they were born. And part of our work is peace-making among the religions of the world. To use the great words of Muhammed in Alkorân: " We make no difference between the prophets." We see them all as teachers of the Most High. And I notice with something of amusement that this view is not very readily grasped, either in the modern East or in the West. I read in newspaper criticisms in the East: " Mrs. Besant says that Theosophy is esoteric Hinduism." I read in the newspapers of the West: " Mrs. Besant says that Theosophy is mystical Christianity," each reporter leaving out the religions that are not the religion of his own land. So that when I say: "Theosophy is the basis of Hinduism, of Buddhism, of mystical Christianity", in the Christian country Hinduism and Buddhism are left out, and only the mystical Christianity remains, and in the Hindu country Buddhism and Christianity are left out, and only Hinduism remains. It does not much matter. To us all religions are sacred. They all lift the heart to the Supreme, console in sorrow, and steady in prosperity; and our work is not to set faith against faith, but to cry everywhere: "Ye are founded on the same basis of eternal Truth. Why, then, do ye fall out by the way ? " That, [Page 11] then, is another part of the work of Theosophy — peacemaking among the religions of the world.

I want next to show you how these theosophical ideas, as they are called, are permeating all thought—scientific, artistic, literary, theological. I do not do this to glorify the Theosophical Society, but rather to show you that these ideas belong to all the world alike. You find constantly in your daily press, in your literature of fiction and amusement, that some idea that twenty-five years ago was said to be theosophical and absurd is alluded to in a commonplace way, or made the centre of a plot. Why, half the novels of today turn on some occult experience. Now that fact to me is full of encouragement; for if I

found that Theosophy, in its garb of the Theosophical Society, was limited within that one Society and was only making one more sect amid the countless sects of the world, I should think little of the promise of its future. But if I find that these ideas do not belong to the Theosophical Society only, but that they are underlying the forward trend of thought in every direction, so that none may say, "they are mine, not yours," ah! then I realise that behind this little body that we call the Theosophical Society there is some great impulse, some mighty spiritual power.

Let us turn to look at it for a moment from that standpoint, and see where our work lies in such a worldwide movement. I discern, under the ordinary facts and theories of life as we have them today, an influence which is guiding humanity towards the ideal and away from materialism. Look at Science. When I was studying chemistry I learned about the atoms, and how they were ultimate particles of matter with unchangeable characteristics which they held from an unknown past, and would hold in an unknown future. Nay, in one book it was written, "from all eternity the atom of carbon has been an atom of carbon, and to all eternity it will so remain." But who says that now? Some say the atom is electricities linked together. Some say it is a body [Page 12] made up of innumerable particles in a rapid state of vibration, the vibratory speed changing under varying conditions. The atom is the most fluid of all things in the scientific concepts of the moment, and threatens to become nothing but a whirl in the ether, perchance made up of electricity, and electricity itself the only atom. But how different all that is from the science of our earlier days. No longer is Science studying matter, it is studying force. No longer does Science argue for the existence of force because there is matter; it argues for the existence of matter because there is force.

Electricity, too, has entirely changed its character, and now-a-days the words of Madame Blavatsky spoken in 1884 — laughed at then as the words of an unscientific charlatan — are being repeated by the foremost electricians — that electricity is atomic; that perhaps there are no atoms at all except electricity. So is Wisdom justified of her children.

And take Psychology. How marvellous the change in that! This wonderful "sub-conscious": what possibilities lie within it for the near future! What discoveries are our New Psychologists bordering in the strange observations that they are making year after year! And when I find among one set of materialistic scientific men, a number of experiments being made at the present time which are only repeating the observations that Sir William Crookes made some thirty years ago, and materialistic physiologists saying that they have proved beyond dispute movement without contact, and the weight of a force they cannot yet measure, I see that thirty years have made much difference, and that scientists can say safely today that for which Crookes nearly forfeited his scientific position in saying some years ago.

And so the trend in Science is toward those forces that as yet are immeasurable and intangible; and yet who can say that they shall not be measured, that they shall not become tangible in the days to come? Only the scientist has to learn that he has well-nigh exhausted the [Page 13] possibilities of nature in the making of delicate mechanism exterior to himself, and that he must begin to evolve that more delicate mechanism within himself which will open to him other realms in which he can observe unchecked. And the work of Theosophy is not only to popularise still more its knowledge of the unseen worlds, but to put that knowledge in a form in which the scientist may take it up if he will, and use it as a reasonable hypothesis. For I do not suggest to the psychologist that he should swallow our theory of consciousness and its veils of matter; but I do suggest to him that as that theory is coherent, as it explains problems he cannot solve, that he might use our theories as hypotheses on which to experiment and so, perhaps, shorten the path of investigation which he treads so patiently.

Turn from Science to Art. What has Theosophy to say to Art? Theosophy declares that Art ought not to be the mere presentment of what is called the real, the objective, but the representation to us of the unseen, the ideal. There is much Art that is greatly admired which simply gives us Nature back on a canvas, often very beautiful as a reproduction of Nature, but still, I think, not the highest type that Art ought to be able to reach; for surely the artist, who is the man of genius, should make real to us the unseen behind the veil, should be able to show the hidden and make it manifest for the instruction of all men. And I see in Art that tendency is coming; I see in Art the ideal is being searched for more than it has been since religion dropped the pencil and the brush, and I look for a day in which again a mighty faith in the invisible will make an Art worthy to be called an Art. Only, instead of pictures of Madonnas and children, we shall have some of the secrets of the world invisible throwing themselves on the canvas of the painter, or living in the music of the musician. The progress of Art must be towards the ideal, to see more as beautiful and not less, and to show that even in things that people think unbeautiful there lies a true beauty for the eye that can see. [Page 14] For we want the poet that can sing the modern world as well as the ancient, and see the true fairy tale under the veil of the present as well as in the mirage of the past. We want the painter, the musician, the poet, who will see the ideal below the objective in every work of Art.

Let us glance at Literature. Literature was sinking more and more towards the materialistic, and it was said that only the materialistic was the natural. The great school of French literature identified with the name of Zola claimed the world "natural" to represent its efforts. Never was a word more misapplied. It is not natural to go and grub in the mud and mire of human nature, and to put that on the literary canvas. It is not thus that Nature works. Nature is ever striving to turn the foul into the pure, and the ugly into the beautiful. Leave her to do her work and what is the result. A corpse falls on the ground and slowly rots. Is it natural only to trace the slow progress of decay and to paint in dark and hideous colours every stage of that gradual disintegration, and then to stop, as though, having traced decay, you had exhausted the possibilities of Nature? Ah, no. Nature takes that rotting corpse and throws over it her earth and falling leaves, until she has covered it, and then, by her wondrous alchemy, out of pollution, out of disintegration, she brings new life, new colour, and new form, until a fair field of flowers covers the graveyard where the rotted corpses lie. Is it natural to describe the collecting of the manure into the dung-heap, and to fill our nostrils with the fetid stench of the rotting filth, to rake it over to disgust our eyes and turn us sick? Nature covers that dung-heap with her creepers and hides it away from sight, while she changes it into the wholesome fertility of her fruitful earth, and gives us instead of this hideousness and fetor the crimson splendour and sweet fragrance of the rose. Such is Nature's working; and the true artist, the artist who is really natural, is the one who, like Nature, hides the hideous and transmutes it into beauty; who, looking into the life of the miserable, the poor, and the degraded, does [Page 15] not only draw the miserable forms, and sketch the squalor, the misery, and the degradation, but shows amid them sweet flowers of human purity, of human charity, of human tenderness, which makes even the slum a garden of the Lord, and shows how humanity can redeem even the vilest of social conditions. For we want our literature to inspire, and not to make us desperate. Far better paint a Utopia which inspires men to effort, than paint some rotting graveyard which tells only of the decay of death, and not the life that inevitably springs therefrom. And so I would have Theosophy everywhere proclaim the ideal in Art and in Literature, as it proclaims the subtle and invisible in Science, and doing this it will have its part in the great movement which is sweeping the world onwards to a nobler and a greater civilisation.

These ideas you may call "theosophical" if you will, for so they are, provided you do not limit them to the Theosophical Society. They are theosophical, but they belong to humanity, to the WISDOM, and not to a single organisation. Once I heard a Theosophist use a phrase that I was very sorry to hear: "our ideas." Ideas are the property of no men or body of men. They are free to every mind that can grasp them. T

have heard it said: " The clergy are beginning to steal our ideas." But they are not ours any more than they are theirs. There is no theft in the commonwealth of thought; all belongs to everyone. Did we invent these ideas ? Did we discover them ? Have we any patent rights in thoughts old as the world and great as humanity itself ? Nay, they belong to the world, and glad and joyous the day will be when there is no longer the need of a Theosophical Society, because everyone will have embraced the truths which it is endeavouring to spread. Enough for us, my theosophical brethren, if we be allowed to act as pioneers of this movement so much greater than ourselves. Let us rejoice with joy ever deepening every time a great truth comes to human hearts clad in the garb most familiar and most welcome to them. Let us rejoice when Theosophy is [Page 16] taught under any name, in any form. Let the ideas flourish; what matters it what becomes of the organisation ?

And if I work for this movement all over the world, it is because I hope for the day when such work shall no longer be necessary, when there will be no " mine " and "thine" in theosophical ideas, but everywhere men will see them as they see the sunlight, and feel the fanning of the breeze. For Divine WISDOM can own no favourites, can make no special choices, can belong to no one exclusively. It is inclusive of all humanity, belongs equally to men of every race and age. And the work of Theosophy in the world is only to help in the unfolding of man's divine nature, knowing that its very name may vanish when all men have become divine.