

THE PATH OF KNOWING – H P BLAVATSKY ON THEOSOHPY

Barry Thompson

At the “Q. Apparently, then, the whole basis of occultism lies in this, that there is latent within every man a power which can give him true knowledge, a power of perception of truth, which enables him to deal first hand with universals if he will be strictly logical and face the facts. Thus we can proceed from universals to particulars by this innate spiritual force which is in every man.

A. Quite so: this power is inherent in all, but paralyzed by our methods of education, and especially by the Aristotelian and Baconian methods. Hypothesis now reigns triumphant.”
‘Secret Doctrine Commentary’ by H. P. Blavatsky (founder of the Theosophical Society) page 47 (part 1.)

Consider The Theosophical Society, which it is often repeated, is a ‘Society without a dogma’. No one is asked about their religious or philosophical beliefs prior to joining, and the sole condition of membership is acceptance of the Three Objects of the Society. Members may profess any creed; pursue any Spiritual Practice in their pursuit of Truth. So the obvious conclusion is that Theosophy must be ‘all things to all men’. Theosophy is a definite body of thought, the Wisdom Tradition of mankind, we are told by the Founders of the Society. The common Spiritual Nature of Mankind –epitomised in the First Object of the Society, Universal Brotherhood – is a guarantor of this Universal Body of Truth. The Theosophical Society has no creed not because it has no definite Truths to offer, but because one either recognises a Truth – or fails to; an acceptance of anything ‘on paper’ achieves nothing.

[Thomas] Vaughan offers a more philosophical definition [of Theosophy]. “A Theosophist,” he says—“is one who gives you a theory of God or the works of God, which has not revelation, but an inspiration of his own for its basis.” In this view every great thinker and philosopher, especially every founder of a new religion, school of philosophy, or sect, is necessarily a Theosophist. Hence, Theosophy and Theosophists have existed ever since the first glimmering of nascent thought made man seek instinctively for the means of expressing his own independent opinions.’ Blavatsky Collected Writings volume 3 page 88.

But there are truths and there are Truths, and, as the word ‘Theosophy’ means ‘Divine Wisdom’, it is the latter with which we are concerned. The scope of Theosophy is the sense of human wonder, psychological insight and compassion that have inspired the great philosophers and thinkers of the past, with perennial questions of universal significance. Not in itself anti-scientific (the subtitle of Madame Blavatsky’s main work on Theosophy, ‘The Secret Doctrine’ defines it as a ‘synthesis of Religion, Philosophy and Science’) it implies that an over – emphasis on detail can lead to a loss of meaning, an inability to ‘see the wood for the trees’:

‘As long as exact science confines its observations and proceeds Aristotle-like, it certainly cannot fail [nb., within these narrow limits – the classification of data]. But notwithstanding that the world of matter is boundless for us, it is still finite [this was written 30 years before Einstein]; and thus materialism will turn forever in this vitiated circle, unable to soar higher than the circumference will permit.’ *Isis Unveiled volume 1 page 7*

Theosophy seeks knowledge of essentials, not of the contingent, things that must be rather than those things which are but which might just as easily be something else (this is one of the things that distinguish it from various systems of fortune-telling, such as Astrology.) Madame Blavatsky, describing Plato's approach to knowledge and truth, sums it up thus:

'For the old Grecian Sage there was a single object of attainment: REAL KNOWLEDGE. He considered those only to be genuine philosophers...who possessed the really existing, in opposition to the mere seeming; of the always existing, in opposition to the transitory..."Beyond all finite existences and secondary causes...there is an INTELLIGENCE or MIND [nous, the Spirit], the First Principle of all Principles, the Supreme Idea on which all other ideas are grounded; the lawgiver of the universe; the ultimate Substance from which all other things derive their being and essence..." Though this eternal essence of things may not be perceptible to our physical sense, it may be apprehended by the mind of those who are not wilfully obtuse.' *Isis Unveiled volume 1 pages xi/xii*

By a process of study, reflection, meditation and service we raise our perceptions out of the rut of the personality, beyond the limitations of our conditioning, be they personal, national, racial or whatever. As we begin to see things in perspective, we learn to separate the essential from the inessential.

Unlike exoteric, or profane, systems of thought, Theosophy also insists that there is a moral dimension to knowledge. In a secular era which emphasises the free availability of 'information' (often just idle chatter), and 'effort free' systems of psychic development, the moral content of an individual not only determines their behaviour but also the quality and nature of their perception:

"Plato, speaking of the Soul (psyche), observes that when she allies herself to the nous [divine substance, a god...], she does everything aright and felicitously; but the case is otherwise when she attaches herself to anoia [loosely, folly]. *Isis Unveiled volume 2 page 282*

Thus it was that the Path to True Wisdom was ever pictured as a series of Initiations, liberation of the Divine 'Inner 'Man from the trammels of the flesh and ignorance:

"The closer the approach to one's Prototype, "in Heaven," the better for the mortal whose personality was chosen, by his own personal deity ..., as its terrestrial abode. For, with every effort of will toward purification and unity with that "Self-god," one of the lower rays breaks and the spiritual entity of man is drawn higher and ever higher to the ray that supersedes the first, until, from ray to ray, the inner man is drawn into the one and highest beam of the Parent-SUN [the Nous.]"

The Secret Doctrine volume 1 pages 638/9

What is the nature of the Divine Knowledge revealed to Mankind in Theosophy? Can knowledge of divinity be couched in any meaningful language at all? Obviously it will bear no similarities to, for example, the Mosaic 'revelation' on Mount Sinai, a series of very specific 'shalts' and 'shalt nots' – a rather peculiar expression of 'eternal' knowledge (Incidentally, much of the follies of the world can be attributed to the mistake of taking the cultural peculiarities of one particular tribe or racial group as direct revelations from on high, and seeking to impose them on all peoples at all times. True Theosophy seeks the divine in all genuine religious movements, but is just as careful in discarding the purely human from its purview.) Once again, Blavatsky calls upon the wisdom of Plato – and a somewhat more modern source – to provide us with an answer:

“With Plato, the Primal Being is an emanation of the Demiurgic Mind (Nous), which contains from the eternity the “idea” of the “to be created world” within itself, and which idea he produces out of himself. The laws of nature are the established relations of this idea to the forms of its manifestations; “these forms,” says Schopenhauer, “are time, space, and causality. Through time and space the idea varies in its numberless manifestations.” *Isis Unveiled volume 1 pages 55/6*

And here is the paradox of the human situation: we are told by the authentic spiritual traditions of the world that manifestation is the expression or radiation of an ineffable spiritual reality, the reflection of a ‘divine mind’, and that the True is eternal, and yet when we view the world we see imperfection and transiency. Does this mean that the ‘Divine Plan’ is awry, that we must seek refuge in our meditation cushions, or that the only Divine realm we must seek is some paradise beyond the here and now? No: the universal ideas, the true essences around which manifestation clusters and towards which our understanding guides us, are not separate from the limitations of manifested existence – we cannot have the one without the other, and true wisdom consists in learning to live our lives under the shadow of this startling dichotomy: There is Nothing Infinite Apart from Finite Things.