

THEOSOPHY

a Timeless World-view for Modern Times

One of man's basic needs is to know, to understand, to find meaning. He must have answers — especially answers to life's fundamental questions — if he is to be whole. Is there design and purpose in nature? Does man's life have any meaning in itself, apart from the meanings he imposes on it? Are there any values built into the scheme of things — values inherent in nature, not only in a given human culture? Does one survive death? Questions such as these have been asked by men for centuries and are still being asked today.

The answers to such questions of ultimate concern are harder to find today in our Western world than they were in past cultures. Today there are many conflicting answers in various religions and philosophic groups, with little to use as a guide in discriminating among them. In past cultures, learned men have agreed upon the basic principles on which the universe is established, and these principles have sometimes been an integral part of the culture as a whole, woven into the fibre of the life of the people.

A thread of truth has appeared repeatedly throughout history, sometimes taught openly and dominating a culture, as in ancient Greece, at other times taught in secret to the few who sought. The principles have been styled differently, and various aspects have been emphasized at different times, but the fundamentals have remained unchanged. This core of understanding, or undying tradition, is known as Theosophy, "divine wisdom," a term which dates back to Alexandria's era of greatness. It is often called occult or esoteric because it is concerned not with the obvious or superficial, but with what is hidden or essential. It deals with nature's unseen processes and laws, with that which stands behind and beyond science. It connotes the study of the metaphysical principles which uphold the universe.

The founders of all the great religions have taught aspects of this doctrine, and strains of it remain in all modern religions, though often buried by misinterpretations which have accumulated through the ages. Yet it is peculiarly modern and in tune with today's search for a world-view to integrate the overwhelming burst of knowledge in the twentieth century. Furthermore, new developments in science have corroborated many of the key ideas of the theosophical philosophy.

This philosophy is an integrated system of thought upholding certain definite principles. It was presented to the modern world mainly through the works of H.P. Blavatsky, whose *magnum opus*, *The Secret Doctrine*, was first published in 1888. She did not claim to have written anything original, but rather to have brought together and restated for the West some of the ancient teachings which had appeared throughout the centuries at different time and places. She drew on original sources of every major religion and the science and philosophy of the principal cultures of East and West to corroborate the presence of the core of Theosophy throughout the ages of man's history.

The key ideas found in *The Secret Doctrine* may be simplified as seven basic principles which can be thought of as underlying all the later interpretations of the theosophical tradition. Most of these principles have convincing substantiation from

science, much of which has emerged only in recent times.

1. One Homogeneous Substance-Principle

The first principle is central to the theosophical system, the axis around which all else turns: There is one living, non-material, creative, homogeneous reality from which everything in the universe has sprung. According to this concept, all nature is immersed in one essential life, all creatures are its reflections; all the complex unfoldment of the universe through evolution is the outworking of principles which inhere in this background reality. All nature is its expression; it shines through the stone, the star, the saint and sinner alike. The world of nature is an ever-moving veil, revealing yet concealing aspects of the eternal, unchanging reality beneath. In the words of H.P. Blavatsky, "The one prevailing, most distinct idea — found in all ancient teachings, most distinct idea — found in all ancient teachings, with reference to Cosmic Evolution . . . is that the whole Cosmos has sprung from the Divine Thought. This thought impregnates matter, which is co-eternal with the One Reality; and all that lives and breathes evolves from the emanations of the One Immutable . . . the eternal one-root."

In the world religions, this reality is called by different names: Brahmân, the Tao, God. But the concept of an underlying divine principle is common to most of the great religions. Lao Tzu says, "It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang." Shankara, the great Indian sage, puts the idea of the context of Hinduism: "The Âtman is that by which the universe is pervaded, but which nothing pervades, which causes all things to shine, but which all things, cannot make to shine."

The idea of unity, so common in Oriental religion and literature, has been prevalent in the West from time to time. Plato and the neo-Platonists taught the concept. In the words of Plotinus, "Each being contains in itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore All is everywhere. Each is therefore All, and All is each." Ruysbroeck, the Christian mystic, says "[In the Reality unitively known by the mystic] we can speak no more of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, nor of any creature, but only of Being . . . There were we all one before our creation." The Christian Bible states, "in him we live and move and have our being."

Eastern religions have always viewed divine reality as an impersonal, universal life pervading nature. Christianity has tended to personalize it into an anthropomorphic concept. However, many modern Christians, under the influence of existential theologians such as Paul Tillich, have developed a concept of the divine that coincides with the theosophical view. They speak of *existential being* as that part of a person or nature which exists in the world of actuality. By *essential being* they mean the inner essence, the full potentiality which inheres in the *ground of being*, or God. The concept of God becomes that of an intangible but real infinite potential which is partially expressed in the world of actuality. Along with the influence of Buddhism, Zen, and Vedanta in the West, this existential idea is spreading and offering many thinking people a view of God which is satisfying and in keeping with

what they know of reality.

The essential brotherhood of all men necessarily stems from the idea of one divine source for all; this is a fundamental concept of the theosophical philosophy and the basic objective of The Theosophical Society. The world's great religious teachers have held this conviction and have devoted their lives through compassion to help people by their teachings.

In H.P. Blavatsky's time, when Theosophists were working for the recognition of brotherhood, an attitude of separativeness and a sense of the superiority of the white race were dominant in the Christian world. But the stresses of the twentieth century are forcing a recognition of the indivisibility of the family of man. We know through bitter experience that a shot fired in Southeast Asia or in Africa will reverberate around the world, that the destinies of the nations are inextricably intertwined. We have learned that the sufferings of any minority group are of concern to the whole of society. Improved travel and communications have made cooperation essential among peoples and nations everywhere. This world-wide scope of the network of relationships is a new development in history, and it is forcing the acceptance of the principle of brotherhood, the essential oneness of all humanity, and the necessity for mutual respect and concern among all peoples. Although this theosophical idea is far from being realized fully in the world today, it is slowly gaining ground through the work of such organizations as the United Nations.

The idea of essential unity implies also that all nature is interrelated and that man is basically a part of it. The Oriental view gives the feeling of man's flowing with and participating in nature's processes. Chinese paintings and poetry in particular illustrate this idea with poignant beauty. Today, evidence of the basic unity in nature comes from the science of ecology, which has revealed the powerful web of interrelationships among living things in any environment, forest, desert, sea, etc. But in the West, with the rise of highly technical societies, man has become divorced from nature and has exploited it, often for short-sighted ends. Experience has shown that he is the worst predator, destroying valuable resources through thoughtless interference with nature's balance. Air and water pollution, by-products of modern man's technological development, have become problems of world concern. If we are to survive, we must learn to live within nature's law of unity.

Psychologists and philosophers have shown another area in which we are paying for our violation of the principle of unity. They point out how much of the physical and psychological distress in our times is rooted in the noise and nervous strain of city life and in man's loss of relatedness to the calming, vivifying influences of nature. Wordsworth was aware of this tragedy long ago:

"The world is too much with us: late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours . . ."

Slowly we are learning the necessity of adjusting life to the essential relatedness of all nature and of man and nature.

The “substance-principle from which the visible world arose” may not be recognized by science as “divine,” but modern cosmologies point to a view of creation as emerging from a non-differentiated substance or principle: “The vacuum of the universe reveals itself as the cradle of matter.” * [Max Gorbunov, *Seven States of Matter.*] This is reminiscent of the poetic statement of creation found in the Book of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” It is in keeping with the theosophical view — found also in Eastern religions — that the universe arose from the void, which is really a plenum.

2. Periodical Manifestations of the One Life

The second proposition of the theosophical philosophy states that universes come and go, the periodical objective manifestations of an unchanging immaterial reality. The phenomenal world, in the ancient view, is an emanation of boundless space which, far from being a featureless void, is a fullness, a continuum with properties which give rise to matter and energy, consciousness and life. The initial impulse which sets this emanation in motion causes the long processes of differentiation, of what we call evolution. This process will continue until the final phase of growth, both physical and spiritual, is reached. According to H.P. Blavatsky, “The Secret Doctrine teaches the progressive development of everything, worlds as well as atoms; and this stupendous development has neither conceivable beginning nor imaginable end.”

Astronomers reveal part of this periodic manifestation as they discover stars and galaxies appearing and disappearing.

The birth and death of stars and universes is an example of a very long-range evolutionary cycle in nature, but the same cyclic process of “periodic manifestation” can be found everywhere. The cycle of an egg, caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly; the inhalation and exhalation of breath; the coming and going of foliage on trees; day and night; the rise and fall of tides; the rise of waters in evaporation, formation of clouds, descent as rain; the spin of an electron around its nucleus; the birth and death of a man; all these and many more are cycles of very different durations. Each is a rhythmic manifestation of the One Life within a great cosmic symphony in which all the many tempi are harmonized into one multilevel over-all cadence by an unseen guiding intelligence.

3. The Changing World and the Immutable One

The next proposition in Theosophy, closely related to the second, is that the universe, though billions of years old, is but brief and temporary compared to the eternal, immutable One. Behind the-many-toned, on-going symphony is the timeless, changeless source of being. Modern physics echoes a version of this idea

in the notion of the electro-magnetic field. The effects of this field can be seen as iron filings arrange themselves along its lines of force when they are sprinkled in a magnetic field. Electrons in a magnetic field also reflect the field as they move in spiral patterns around the lines of force. The field governs the way particles in it move and behave. Although the strength of a localization of the field at a particular moment may be varied, the field itself is changeless, eternal, non-material, and exists everywhere in space whether or not there are particles for it to influence. Thus the field potential is universal, continuous, and unchanging. This gives a vivid and realistic picture of the powerful influence of the immutable, non-material reality behind nature — the ground of being — God. It provides a glimpse of how essential, intelligent life guides the whole universal process of unfoldment of its potentialities through eons of time.

4. Guiding Principles Within the Universe

Examples such as the magnetic field make credible in the twentieth century another ancient theosophical view — that the universe is worked and guided from within outward, is not the product of chance but the outworking of inner guiding principles. This idea is firmly established in modern physics. We know that what appears to our senses as solid, stationary, stable, is actually a wild dance of electric forces, and that the make-up and behaviour of matter is governed by the unseen electromagnetic and gravitational fields.

In biology, too, the idea of an inner guiding principle is emerging under the name of *self-representation*. For example, the exotic colour and patterns of marking found on marine snails deep in the ocean appear to serve no conceivable purpose in the survival of the snail. Yet this beauty costs the snail a considerable expenditure of energy. This principle of self-representation is dramatic in embryonic development where two cells go through many stages identical in all mammals, but where finally the body plan and instinctual make-up characteristic of the species is produced.

In psychology, the idea of *self-actualization* can be thought of as corresponding to that of self-representation in biology, but with new dimensions for man. In this view, the goal of life for each person is to unfold all his inner potentials for creativity, love, intelligence, etc., in the fullest possible measure. Here the inner guiding principle of unfoldment would be unique for each individual and would govern psychological and mental, or inner, growth, as well as physical and biological development.

These new concepts of science, expounded long ago in *The Secret Doctrine*, show some of the inner guiding principles as they shape the world of life, man and matter. They support the theosophical concept of the immense, on-going process of the universe as lawful and orderly and guided from within by an innate intelligence, or universal mind. Here nature is seen, not as a chance of haphazard mechanical occurrence, but as an organized, evolutionary process with definite direction. The whole scheme is moving toward the development of increasingly complex forms which unfold ever richer expressions of consciousness.

5. All Kingdoms of Nature Have Consciousness

The essential unity of life implies that there is no split between consciousness and matter. Theosophy holds that everything in the universe throughout all its kingdoms is conscious, i.e., endowed with its own kind of consciousness on its own plane of perception. Mystics and poets throughout the ages have conveyed their ecstatic, intuitive feeling for the life of the flower, the rock, the stream, the creature.

The work of Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit paleontologist, in the context of science has gone far to show that consciousness is inherent in matter from the beginning, and its expression is enhanced as more and more complex forms are evolved. What he terms the *within of things* is the conscious or inner subjective side of matter and organisms. There is experimental evidence now to show that the beginning of life, with its simple consciousness or ability to respond to stimuli, arose from inert matter. Under simulated early earth conditions, amino acids, which are the building blocks of proteins, have formed spontaneously. Under further experimentation the amino acids joined together spontaneously to form *protenoids*, complex molecules very like natural proteins which are the building blocks of protoplasm, the substance of living things. The dualism of matter and consciousness is fading out as evolutionists find the root of consciousness locked up in matter itself. This is in accord with the theosophical view. And, as the psychologist Gardner Murphy put it, this does not disparage the flowering of consciousness in man but rather glorifies the primal ooze.

Other fascinating and strange studies in physics show that something almost resembling choice manifests in matter. For example, radioactive cobalt nuclei give off more electrons on one side as they rotate. Physicists see vast implications from this strange finding, and it turns out that these studies provide evidence for the next proposition.

6. Purposiveness in Evolution

In the theosophical view the whole order of nature gives evidence of purposiveness in its evolution. Teilhard de Chardin traces such a thread through palaeontology, the study of fossils. He shows that side by side with greater "complexification" of forms there is a corresponding enrichment of consciousness. He, Julian Huxley the biologist, and others hold that for man physical evolution has reached a standstill and will undergo no more significant changes, but that evolution is now focussed in the mental and moral sphere. This echoes the theosophical view. *The Secret Doctrine* outlines the development of man over immense periods of time, each phase unfolding some aspect or special quality of the one unseen consciousness behind the universe. It depicts a vast evolutionary scheme for men, stars, planets, creatures, even minerals, all of which for a time actualize and express part of the immense and exhaustless potential of the background reality. Forms come and go, change, and slowly improve through time, through trial and error, so that they are capable of releasing more and more of the divine consciousness latent at the heart of nature. *The Secret Doctrine* says, "The whole order of nature evinces a

progressive march towards a higher life."

7. The Cycles for Man

From the theosophical standpoint, man is seen as part of this whole flow of evolution, but mankind today is far from mature in an evolutionary sense. The existentialists are in accord with Theosophy when they speak of actualizing essential being. Theosophy, too, regards man as a partial expression of the ground of being destined to make manifest new dimensions of this background reality which is his essential nature. Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, expressed this idea: "The seed of God is in us. Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer, it will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is; and accordingly its fruits will be God-nature. Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and God seed into God." According to Theosophy, man is an unlimited potential, one with and identical with the divine life. Mystics through the ages have given testimony to the interior faculty by which a person can know directly within himself that he is one with the unseen creative background, or God. The existentialists have stressed that an individual is fulfilled and productive when he is developing and expressing this divine potential locked up in his talents and abilities by engaging in useful work and in growing relations with others. But Theosophy holds that man is not limited to the short span of one lifetime in his long-range purpose of actualizing the essential self.

The seventh principle of Theosophy, in affirming that every individual is fundamentally identified with the universal Oversoul, states that each passes through cycles of incarnation in accordance with the law of cause and effect. This is an ancient view held by well over half the people of the world today — that there is a cycle of reincarnation for man as there is a cycle of flowering and latency for trees. The same law of cycles seen throughout nature expresses itself in death, rest, and rebirth for man: an individual having countless lives in many races and cultures, sometimes as a man, sometimes as a woman, in many walks of life. Just as sub-human forms improve and provide a basis for enhanced consciousness through evolution, man's mind, emotions and body slowly improve through eons of living and experience, so that he is able to actualize new dimensions of the divine life.

Further, according to the theosophical philosophy, the interests, relationships, abilities of one lifetime will reverberate in future lives, according to the law of *karma* or cause and effect. Mental and emotional forces set in motion, for good or ill, must inevitably react upon the individual at some future time in some life. The gifts and handicaps of a lifetime are the result of the ways in which energies have been used in the past, and they bring opportunities or frustrations to the individual's deeply buried urge to actualize his possibilities. But the whole stream of evolution is pushing him forward, sometimes gently, sometimes with force, and through time will release more and more of the powers locked up within him. Theosophy sees mankind as a whole slowly becoming more effective, more creative, more loving, so that future man will be as far beyond us as we are now beyond the cave man. Throughout history, there have been individuals who foreshadow this future growth

for all and show by their greatness what man can be.

Theosophy does not offer short cuts or a panacea to solve the difficult and complex problems of our times. But it does give a hopeful long-range view of eventual fulfilment for all people. Its concepts re-establish purpose and meaning in the universe and in man and give one a firm foundation on which to build one's life. These ideas call out the deep, partially unconscious, urge within each person to move on, to grow, to release his potentials in productive work. And as he takes his life in hand toward this end, he comes to feel and understand more and more within himself the essential truth of these timeless ideas and their directive power in his life. Though life will not necessarily become easier, he will come to know the incomparable rewards of aligning his life with the creative source of being and moving forward consciously with the evolutionary stream.

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