

## The Objects of the Theosophical Society by Bertram Keightley

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[Page 1] THE watchword of every true and earnest member of the Theosophical Society should be Brotherhood. This is the true meaning of our motto: "There is no Religion higher than Truth"; for Truth is One, and to grasp Truth is to lay hold on the essential unity of Life and Being, in other words, to consciously realise this unity, this universal, all-pervading principle of Brotherhood.

That such is, indeed, the true ideal and purpose of the T.S., is shown by the fact that Universal Brotherhood not only stands first and foremost among its three Objects, but is also the only one whose acceptance is obligatory on all who join the ranks of the Society.

In spite, however, of repeated declarations to this effect, many people, even within the Society, still regard its First Object as an empty name, a mere catchword adopted in order to work on the sentimentality of emotional people, and emphasised in order [Page 2] to give a colouring of universality and non-sectarianism to what many regard as an attempt to found a new religion, or at least to preach a new philosophy. This radical misconception of the purpose and scope of the Theosophical Society has been greatly fostered and augmented by the fact that the attention of the public has been mainly drawn to and centred upon its Second and Third Objects.

The teachings and doctrines of *Theosophy*, though in no sense those of the *Society*, have yet held such a prominent place in its history and absorbed so much of the activity of its members, that they have to a great extent obscured its first and primary purpose. These doctrines, moreover, were so new and strange to the West, they opened up such illimitable fields of thought, they held forth such glorious promise for the future growth and achievement of mankind, that they very naturally came to occupy almost the entire field of view. To this was added all the force of that tendency, innate in many a human heart which demands the rest and satisfaction of a formulated creed, an orthodoxy. Few are those strong enough to live in a state of continual growth, of ceaseless mental expansion and change. To the majority, a Society occupying itself with Religion, as does the T.S., *must* have some dogma, secret or avowed, some creed, some final, all-sufficient doctrine. Failing to find this in the simple, noble ideal of human Brotherhood, they sought it in the teachings of Theosophy: [Page 3] and when told that Theosophy is not the *creed* of the Theosophical Society, they exclaimed against an association which therefore seemed to them to be destitute of backbone, so flabby and lacking in consistence. They did not perceive that the only Universal Religion is Universal Brotherhood, and that this ideal excludes by its very nature, every form of dogma or orthodoxy from the hearts of those who truly follow its noble teaching.

A second reason, which has largely contributed to distract attention from the ideal of Brotherhood and to obscure the true nature of the Society in the public mind, is to be found in the occult or psychic

phenomena which have occurred in connection with our work. To discuss these in detail would be beyond the scope of this address: but a few words on their relation to the Society and its work, though of course a digression, may perhaps not be out of place in this connection.

In the opinion of some, the occurrence of such phenomena, and especially the publicity given to them, have been a deplorable mistake. But I am inclined to think otherwise. For first, these phenomena proved experimentally the existence of a world of forces in Nature and man which lie beyond the cognisance of our physical senses, and thus laid a basis upon which to teach the Eastern teachings as to Nature and man; and secondly, they proved that the person who was engaged in bringing these doctrines [Page 4] before the world was possessed of knowledge and power undreamt of by our modern scientists. Now, before devoting time and energy which require years of hard and persistent labour, every man naturally asks himself whether the teacher whose works he is about to study is a competent instructor in such matters. And apart from the phenomena, I fail to see what other direct evidence *preliminary* to actual study of the subject could have been given on this point. True, the phenomena themselves prove nothing as to the teachings of Theosophy: indeed, there is no logical connection between them and such ideas as Karma, Reincarnation, the law of Cycles, *etc.*. But the phenomena do prove that the person who produced them *has* a deeper acquaintance with Nature and man than is possessed by any of our present scientific teachers. Hence any thoughtful man is fully warranted in devoting much time and study to her views, with the conviction that his researches are being guided by a competent instructor.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the *undue* prominence given to these phenomena has in some respects been disadvantageous to the growth of the T.S. They have riveted public attention upon matters of secondary importance, and thrown into the shadow the more important teachings, ethical and spiritual, of Theosophy, as well as at times hidden from view our one great goal — the Brotherhood of Man. [Page 5]

These phenomena properly pertain, of course, to the Third Object of the Society, and the undue prominence given to them by some persons has fostered an idea which has been fertile in unfortunate consequences: I mean the notion that the T.S. is a school of magic, a hall of occultism, a Society in which men may gain power and Knowledge for the gratification of their ambition, their vanity or their curiosity. I propose, therefore, in the following pages to endeavour to show the relations of the Second and Third Objects of the T. S. to the First, and to prove that, instead of our three Objects being, as often erroneously supposed, separate, distinct, disconnected, they are in truth intimately and vitally related to each other: the Second and Third Objects of the Society indicating the only lines upon which we may reasonably hope to achieve the ultimate realisation of our grand ideal, the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity. We shall better understand the platform of the Theosophical Society if we consider the ground upon which its Founders based their proclamation of Universal Brotherhood, and then observe how the Society they formed endeavours to realise that ideal.

One of the Founders of the Society had been trained in the noblest and loftiest school of Eastern Wisdom, in whose teachings the doctrine of the essential unity of all Beings holds the first, most prominent place. Regarding all "separateness", all consciousness of being apart from the great whole, as illusion, [Page 6] this philosophy, especially when actually realised as a series of facts in consciousness, naturally leads the student to seek this fundamental Unity of All as his first object.

The other Founders were of Western training, the most active and prominent being men who viewed with the utmost apprehension the disintegrating influence of materialistic science, and who earnestly sought

for means to combat its advance. They read the lesson of history and saw that Religion was perishing through the religions, whose number, differences, and exclusive claims to the possession of Truth disgusted most enlightened men, and caused them to feel that this very conflict between creeds, sects, churches, and dogmas was in itself evidence enough that the Truth dwelt not among them. History shows that no wars have been so bitter as those waged in the name of Religion, that no cause has tended more to separate man from man and people from people than difference of creed: that, finally, no greater obstacle has impeded the search after truth than dogmatic theology, whether in Pagan antiquity or Christian times.

From the association of these two lines of thought arose the conception of a Society whose foundation-stone should be Unity, a Society which should transcend every limitation that human selfishness and folly have imposed upon human thought, a Society which should seek to unite all men in the common search [Page 7] for Truth, by repudiating all dogma, all sectarianism, endeavouring to lay bare the unity of life and so make Religion the saviour, instead of the executioner, of humanity.

From this standpoint, the Brotherhood of Humanity was seen by the Founders to be a *spiritual* fact, the actual reality of Nature: and on this conception they based their declaration of the Society's purpose, and made it the rock upon which their association was founded.

Though such a train of thought as this guided the Founders of the T.S., yet neither their conclusions nor their process of reasoning is the least binding on any man who may join the Society they founded. Still, this view of the Brotherhood of Man as primarily a *Spiritual fact* determined the choice of its Second and Third Objects. For the realisation of a spiritual fact in Nature could best be achieved through intellectual study and growth, and hence the leaders of the T.S. have always been engaged in mental rather than physical philanthropy. Thus it is at once evident that the task to be undertaken by the Society was to remove religious and sectarian differences, to exhibit and demonstrate the fundamental unity and identity of all creeds. Now the Founder through whom the real inspiration of the work came, had in the course of her studies become aware of the existence of a body of knowledge, a scientific, coherent, and demonstrated system of facts in Nature, [Page 8] which formed the basis on which the various world-religions had originally been built. For it must not be forgotten that every religion worthy of the name claims to be, and to a greater or less extent is, a statement of *facts* in nature, just as real and far more important, because more far-reaching, than those which come under the purview of physical science. Moreover, she was in a position to assist very largely in proving the existence of this common basis and in exhibiting its coherence, its logical character, and its consistency with all our experimental knowledge of the world around us. Thus the task was not an Utopian endeavour, but a practicable undertaking, the goal of which was clear to her eyes and the materials for which lay ready to her hand. And besides this, the Founders were able to count upon the active assistance of many able and learned men of various nationalities. Hence the choice of the Second Object of the T.S., the study of ancient religions, literatures and philosophies, especially those of the Aryan races, with a view to demonstrating the fundamental identity of all religions.

The importance of this work as a means for promoting brotherly feeling among men is readily apparent. Great confusion has prevailed all the world over, but especially in the West, between the ethics of *conduct* and the ethics of *belief*. Men had become accustomed to regard those who differed from themselves in religious belief as morally criminal. Indeed, to many [Page 9] minds it appeared, and even still appears, a far more heinous crime to deny the exclusive divinity of Jesus than to murder, steal,

oppress, or commit the most terrible offence against the moral law. Moreover, the narrow view almost universally taken of religion in the West, combined with this confusion of thought, not only resulted in wars and persecutions, but afforded a rich and fertile field for the growth of human selfishness, and the development of its worst passions under the cloak of religious zeal. Men were encouraged to deceive themselves, to ignore the fact that there is no intrinsic difference between hatred, revenge and cruelty when practised in the name of religion, and the same passions when indulged in for personal gratification.

If, then, men could be brought to higher, purer, and, above all, truer conceptions of Religion as the Universal Truth, perceived by each individual under a different aspect, it is plain that one of the most prolific causes of hatred, strife, and division would be smoothed for the growth of brotherly feeling throughout all sections of the human race.

In dealing with the relation of the Second Object of the Society to the First, while I have only briefly indicated the line of reasoning which can readily be worked out and expanded by each one for himself, I trust that enough has been said to prove the intimate relation, and to show that the Second Object is one of the most important and appropriate [Page 10] means by which realisation of the First may be attempted.

In making the same attempt as regards the Third Object, "the study of unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers of man", a somewhat fuller treatment of the subject will be necessary, especially as a connection is in this case neither so apparent, nor has it been much dwelt upon or explained in current literature, I shall first take the relation of our Third Object to the First through the Second, and then consider its direct bearing upon the First.

Religion, in all its aspects, has been hitherto, notably in the West, almost entirely a matter of faith, either traditional or based upon individual experience. The intellect, and especially the observing faculties, have not had free play, and in consequence there is very little solid, scientifically-demonstrated groundwork to support the vast superstructure that forms the various creeds now held by men. But we have entered upon a time when Reason has become powerful and demands that the emotional and intuitional perceptions which have hitherto been more or less blindly accepted shall be based upon and conform to observed facts. It is the province of Physical Science to record and classify the facts of the physical world, and to build upon them generalisations which, when fully established, we call "laws of Nature". It should be the province of Religion to perform the same task for those other planes of being [Page 11] which transcend the range of our physical senses. But in both Religion and Science there must equally be a basis of observed facts; and, in both, the generalisations reached must conform to the same laws of Reason.

Hence, if we admit the existence of planes of being and consciousness other than the physical, it is clear that their investigation and observation are essential to the discovery of religious truth. But to make these investigations requires an appropriate instrument of observation, which can only be found in man himself, and in the development of powers and faculties which are as yet latent in the majority of mankind. That such powers and faculties really do exist is rendered in the highest degree probable by the consistent and concordant record that abnormally developed individuals have existed at all periods in the world's history, a record confirmed and substantiated by repeated and careful observation in our own day.

Hence the Third Object of the Society is a necessary corollary to the Second, an indispensable means for its achievement, and therefore an indirect, but none the less vitally important, aid to the realisation of the First.

But more than this. I hope to show that our First and Third Objects are each the necessary complement of the other: that Universal Brotherhood can only be *realised* by and through the psychic and [Page 12] spiritual development of the individual, while the effort to realise that same ideal of Brotherhood itself forms the most powerful and effective means of bringing about this inner growth — nay, that all truly spiritual growth involves and tends towards the realisation of that sublime goal of human endeavour.

But it is obvious that all human beings are not brothers, physically speaking, except in a very loose sense of the word. Hence, to prove the reality of Universal Brotherhood as a spiritual fact in nature, we must first demonstrate that man possesses the means to explore other planes of nature than that of gross matter. In other words, it must be shown that human consciousness can operate independently of the physical organism. This fact has, however, been amply proven by experimental research, both in antiquity and in our own day, notably in the domain of mesmerism, now re-christened hypnotism. These observations show further that the range of perception and the activity of human consciousness increase in proportion as the physical organism approaches a state of *complete* inactivity closely resembling actual death.

Now, from the consideration of the changes which our consciousness normally undergoes during dream and deep sleep, as well as from the light thrown by various carefully observed instances of abnormal changes and variations of consciousness, the following general conclusions have been deduced, by strict [Page 13] scientific reasoning, as to the characteristics of human consciousness.

The consciousness of each human being at any moment is limited by his "threshold of sensation". (Note. As the term "threshold of sensation" will probably be new to most members of the Society, a brief explanation may be desirable. It is a well-ascertained fact that any stimulus must possess a certain degree of intensity in order to affect our consciousness so that we perceive it. Now the intensity or the stimulus thus required varies in different states of organism and with different degrees of mental preoccupation or absorption. For instance, if one is deeply absorbed in a book, it will require a much louder call to make him hear than when the mind is not so engaged. The degree of intensity which any given stimulus must attain in order to affect our consciousness, determines what stimuli we shall consciously perceive and what we shall remain unaware of. Generalising this fact, we see that, among all the stimuli striking upon our consciousness, only such will excite conscious perception as attain a certain degree of intensity, which thus forms as it were the bounding line of our field of perception. This boundary is the "threshold of perception" or "threshold of sensation". It separates, so to speak, the lighted area, or field of our perceptions, from what is "without", or, as we usually phrase it, "outside ourselves". The magnitude of [Page 14] the lighted area, of course, varies enormously in different persons. A man may be perfectly indifferent to all the higher and subtler stimuli, which we call the feelings of moral, intellectual, and artistic beauty and purity; or he may perceive them only dimly, so that they fail to excite in him any keen or vivid perception. This conception is a very fertile one, and can be worked out in many directions, with the result of throwing much light on the facts of our daily life and experience.)

But his potential consciousness enormously transcends the limited sphere so defined, which alone he is

normally cognisant of during his waking hours.

This "threshold" is, however, susceptible of very wide oscillations, and can be so pushed back that man can embrace in his consciousness a very large part of what transcends his physical perceptions. (Note. For a detailed proof of the above see Dr. Carl du Prel's *Philosophy of Mysticism*.)

In this shifting of the threshold of consciousness lies the possibility of all psychic development. For, in Theosophical phrase, the limited sphere of consciousness bounded by the threshold of sensation constitutes what is called the "personality", while the vaster area of consciousness which (to us) lies on the further side of this threshold is the "individuality". Now, if we seek the determining cause of this limitation, we shall find it lies in the fact that our interest, our attention, is usually centred largely or wholly [Page 15] upon the physical plane, the field of our consciousness being entirely occupied by the powerful and vivid stimuli which reach us through the avenues of physical sensation, or which arise in connection therewith on the emotional and mental planes. But in certain abnormal states, whether induced by the mesmeric action of another or by the will-power of the individual himself, we find that the transcendental consciousness, or individuality, makes itself manifest upon the physical plane. In such cases it is found that the limited consciousness, or personality, is treated by the higher Ego as something foreign to itself, as a mere incidental phase of its own development. But it is just this limited consciousness, or the personality (which at such times disappears from view), that produces in us the feeling that we are each separate from all our fellow men. For the feeling, the consciousness, of "self" is limited (as we know it) to the lighted area within the threshold of consciousness, since that alone is constantly and vividly present to us. Analogy may help us to grasp this idea more clearly. It is a common experience that a man identifies "himself" with his keenest and most vivid feeling or interest, and this is what occurs with regard to the general area of personal consciousness. Man identifies "himself" with that which is constantly and vividly present before him, *i.e.*, with the lighted area within his threshold of sensation. Further, our instinctive belief in the existence and [Page 16] reality of an "outside world" is due to the fact that all stimuli which reach our consciousness from beyond this threshold naturally seem to us to come from "outside" of ourselves, since what we feel as "self" is, as we have seen, only the lighted area within this bounding line.

Moreover, we find that in proportion as the threshold of consciousness is pushed back, so does the feeling of separateness diminish; and the same law can be traced right up through every stage of growth and development, mental, emotional, and psychic. Hence we may assert generally that expansion of the field of our consciousness goes hand-in-hand with the detachment of our interest and attention from the physical plane, and from the feelings and sensations which form the content of the personality.

Now it is at once obvious that the real obstacle preventing our realisation of Universal Brotherhood is just this feeling of separateness, and we have just seen that in proportion as we grow and develop psychically this feeling tends to disappear. It is thus plain that the study and investigation of the latent psychic faculties in man tend directly towards the realisation of the First Object of the T.S.

As we push back the boundary and enlarge the area of our consciousness, our "self" grows and expands in the same proportion, till at last, when we have so widened our circle of interests and removed back our threshold of consciousness that it embraces [Page 17] the Universe, then, in the language of *The Light of Asia*, "the Universe grows I", "the dewdrop slips into the shining sea", Nirvana is attained, not by

annihilation of individuality, but by its expansion till it embraces all.

This subject can also be regarded from another point of view. All stimuli which reach our consciousness are in "reality forms of vibration, subtler or coarser, more or less rapid, and taking place in media, grosser or more ethereal, as the case may be. In genera], the more rapid the vibration and the more subtle the medium it occurs in, the higher — that is, the more spiritual — is the accompanying consciousness. Now we shall cognise either coarser or subtler vibrations according as our interest and attention are centred upon material or spiritual things, on one pole or the other of the one Reality. It is clear therefore that, while our attention is taken up and our consciousness filled with things physical, we cannot clearly and vividly cognise things spiritual. But the distinguishing characteristic of Spirit is universality: it is all-pervading. Hence the more our perceptions approach the spiritual plane, the more we must become at one with that which is all-pervading, because to become cognisant of spiritual things we must respond to the higher vibrations of that plane. Thus, in order to attain the inner development pointed out in our Third Object, we must in literal truth seek so to attune ourselves as to [Page 18] "thrill in response to every sigh and thought of all that lives and breathes".

Thus, then, Universal Brotherhood is not only the foundation-stone of the Theosophical Society, but literally the essence of its Second and Third Objects — the life-giving spirit in them all. Without this grand and sublime ideal, the study of ancient religions, sciences, and philosophies would lose its noblest and purest charm. Without it, the pursuit of the Third Object would be either altogether meaningless or, if in any degree successful, it would lead to the most disastrous consequences, as witness the criminal uses to which the newly rediscovered powers of hypnotism have already been put. Without such a goal to strive for, such a lofty purpose to animate us, our liberality of thought would soon become aimless licence, our efforts to study the Wisdom Religion would soon end in the formation of a new sect, the life would die out from among us, and the Theosophical Society would either crumble into dust or remain a frozen and lifeless corpse, encased in the ice of Dogmatism.