

Theosophical Conceptions of Compassion and Human Affection

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[Page 3] THERE is no aspect of Theosophy, so far as my experience goes, that is more difficult of explanation than its conceptions of compassion and human affection.

To most minds the presentment of them appears a vast paradox, incomprehensible and mystical. I feel very uncertain of success in this attempt to render the paradox less incomprehensible, but it is an attempt that all Theosophists have to make, and discussion may possibly throw some light on the subject. On the one hand we have to meet the objections of those who fail to trace any difference between the Theosophical conceptions and those of Christianity; and upon the other, the objections of those who see in the former nothing but coldness, lovelessness and an unnatural asceticism.

Roughly put, Theosophy holds that the highest sentiment that the human mind can conceive of is an impersonal compassion, the fulfilment of the Eternal Law of Harmony in fact; it holds that this all-embracing compassion is the result of vast experience, and of conquered emotion, and that human affection, which ranges from animal instinct to the purest ideal of human brotherhood, is the training ground for such a condition.

It is owing to this impersonal characteristic that it appears to be bereft of all that we commonly connote by the term compassion. But let us see if there is nothing in its nature that attracts, nothing that stirs our enthusiasm, or stimulates aspiration: if so, surely it is worth pursuing, if not, let us cast it aside.

"All steps are necessary to make up the ladder", and all degrees of affection must be experienced by the student of life. Theosophy maintains that the only means of obtaining such experience is by a series of lives, or a gradual evolution of lives upon this earth. It can account in no other way for all grades of affection manifested around us. Think of all that is to be learned from love of self, parent, wife, child, friend, nation, brother.

It is obvious that to draw the sum total of experience from all these varieties in one short life would indeed be wearing even if it were possible, and common-sense tells us that it is not possible. Re-incarnation alone explains the manner in which such experience may be gained.

The theologian who rejects hell, rejects it on his own responsibility, and because he interprets the Bible for himself. The vague but growing [Page 4] theory that life will be continued after death under conditions

ensuring continued spiritual progress, and terminating finally in a heaven that is equally vague, has no authority beyond the imagination of the theorist, and his own innate sense of justice: it has, moreover, a curious family likeness to the theory of Purgatory, and does not differ essentially from that of Re-incarnation.

There can be no doubt but that all men thirst for experience, and the demand for fiction proves that those who lack it in real life seek it in fiction. It is, of course, not the fact that men glean their chief experience of life through the medium of their affections. Ambition, love of power, study, are the ruling motives with many. But we are here treating the matter from the point of view of affection, and it is fair, I think, to say that the majority of mankind earn their deepest experience, sooner or later, through this channel.

The nature of our affection in any given incarnation depends on the point of evolution which our lives in the past have enabled us to reach. At some definite period in the lives of most, a clearly defined and conscious choice arises as to the aim and motive of life. The moment in which we detect the possibility of choice, is the moment when responsibility begins, and to the true Theosophist this moment has dawned. We learn from the "Secret Doctrine" that the Egos or Kumaras, those spiritual entities from a previous man-bearing planet, who have taken up their abode in man, are not all equally progressed, and observation tells us that human beings are no less unequally developed. It stands to reason, therefore, that a natural selection takes place in the choice of an instrument, or body, through which the Ego or higher mind shall function during incarnation.

The love that gives all and claims nothing for itself is the only one that Theosophy recognises as worthy the name and, by an apparent paradox, when it has reached this point love takes another name and another form. It becomes that divine impersonal love which loves its enemies, that charity which never faileth, that love by which men know that we are brothers; it is that compassion which says: "Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer ? " This love is not affection, this love is *not* human.

It is because all human love is tainted with the desire to *take*, with the desire for self-gratification — often in its most subtle form — that Theosophy denies its supremacy, and this to many minds argues a complete inability to appreciate its value. For people cling passionately to their emotions, and no wonder. They seem the one heaven-born possession, the only point where man is in touch with his higher nature, and at certain stages of evolution I believe this to be true: far be it from me to underrate affection as a power to ennoble and to save.

But the moment that the larger view of life is grasped which Theosophy [Page 5] affords, our previous ideas concerning affection undergo a change, and this is inevitable, since the enlargement of our horizon has opened up possibilities of which previously we were unconscious. For our sense of proportion is completely altered. We begin to question the purpose of emotion, what is its effect upon ourselves, and upon others ? We stand aghast at the answer to these questionings. We find that we are face to face with the suspicion, if not the certainty, that beneath every blossom of love is coiled the snake of self and that it is raising its head to spring.

Here then is the battle-ground in sight, and the choice before us as to whether we will tread the old paths of affection or whether we will enter upon the one of renunciation. The questions that now present

themselves are as follows: —

1. Will you continue to find a complete and final satisfaction in the love of others for you, in your love for others, which has bound them to you in the past, which binds them to you now, and which will assuredly bind them to you in the future ?

2. Are you sure that those whom you love would pay the price for this love did they realise what it meant ? Have you tried to explain to them what it means ? No one who loves truly would deliberately forge these chains did he believe that such love, such absorbing, personal love was an injury to the object of it. It has never occurred to most people that it could be possible, and yet this is the logical conclusion which we are compelled to grant.

3. Again, do you and they think life here so desirable that you will voluntarily face it over and over again with no greater knowledge of its purpose than you have now, no increase of power to help others who have few or none of the joys which make life only tolerable to even you, who perhaps have a large share of them ?

As so often said, no blame attaches to those who decide to remain upon the old track, feeling themselves incapable of a plunge into the new. With no natural leaning towards Occultism, they may be true Theosophists. They are not ready for the plunge, they have yet something to learn from their emotions. Indeed, encouragement is held out to them. The "*Voice of the Silence*" says: " If the doctrine of the heart be too high winged for thee. if thou needest help thyself and fearest to offer help to others ... be warned in time. . . . Hope still and be of good cheer, and rest content with fate. Such is thy Karma, the Karma of the cycle of thy births, the destiny of those who in their pain and sorrow are born along with thee, rejoice and weep from life to life chained to thy previous actions" And again "Thou canst create this day (in this life) thy chances for tomorrow".

(The " Heart Doctrine" is, of course, the inner doctrine taught to those who enter the path of renunciation. Karma is the law of causation) [Page 6]

Here is no injunction to any unnatural forcing of our emotions. All Theosophy says here is — learn from your emotions, weight them, be master of them, not a slave to them, you do not know what you may learn by so doing.

Nor is the path of renunciation one of enforced asceticism, as so many believe. We can only do with real effect what the prompting of our own conscience makes inevitable to us, and moreover in the motive which leads us into that path lies the potency of the impulse. The path of renunciation does not lead us out from the world, on the contrary, the world is the very place where our work lies, until we have done our whole duty by every duty".

What we *are* called upon to do is to renounce self. To say this is far easier than to accomplish it, and those who have accomplished it are the only real benefactors of mankind, while those who follow in their

steps must at least have alike inspiration. "What I aspired to be and was not comforts me", says Browning in "Abt Vogler"; and again "A man's reach must exceed his grasp". Aspiration accomplishes more than we dream of, and the first step is to live *in* the world thought not of it.

This does not mean that we are to cease to love others. "If thou art told that to cease loving all men tell them that they lie", we are told in the "Voice of the Silence". So long as man is man he must prefer some people to others, the laws of his nature and of magnetism demand it, but the test of the character of his preference is its exclusiveness or comprehensiveness. The law of his nature makes it easy for him, as a rule, to love those who love him, but in so far as he struggles to be equally just to all, never to let his preference for one make him indifferent to the many or make him sacrifice *any* for the *one*, in so far as he is winning the victory over his nature as man, he is drawing upon the strength of his divinity.

There is a passage in a book called the "Lover of the Beautiful" which exactly expresses what I mean. I will read it: —

"Amore was taught to believe that the one thing needful was to love and to be loved: a doctrine that is not without its value. But even this fundamental truth must be taken, with certain qualifications, in its fullest and widest sense, and the gospel of love as Amore learned it was not so much that divinest and all-embracing love of humanity in the gross, as the narrower concentration of passionate heart upon those few favoured individuals who alone, out of all the world, have power to rouse the deepest emotions of our being, the love that will exhaust its energies for *one*, and sacrifice itself for *one*, but that from its very nature draws us apart from our fellow-creatures in a deep and absorbing exclusiveness".

We should love because it is *right* to love, not because it gives us pleasure to do so; we should love the good in others; we should see [Page 7] humanity represented in the human being. We must learn, as our teachers tell us, to "attune our hearts to *Humanity's* great pain", to live and breathe in all, as all that lives, lives and breathes in us. So shall we be in full accord with all that lives, bear love to men as though they were the pupils of one teacher, the sons of one sweet mother.

This instruction is given to the disciple ere he approaches the foremost gate on the path of wisdom, and the definite aspiration towards this condition marks the transition from selfish to unselfish love. "He that saveth his life shall lose it, but he that loseth his life for my sake" (here the Christ principle speaks) "shall save it." This is the paradox in its Christian garb. Here it is as expressed by one of our Masters: — "Give up thy life if thou wouldst live". "When you have flung life away it comes back to you with new meaning". "When you have conquered the first hunger of the heart and have ceased to desire the love of others . . . you find yourself more capable of inspiring it in others".

I do not say that self-surrender is exclusively the Theosophical ideal. That would be clearly untrue. Self-sacrifice has been the keynote of all greatness since the beginning of time, and is the possession of all great souls, Christian or Pagan. Take for instance George Eliot's noble words at the end of that wonderful book "Romola". Romola is speaking to her husband's illegitimate child

It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow

pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as for ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see that it is good. There are so many things wrong and difficult in the world that no man can be great — he can hardly keep himself from wickedness — unless he gives up thinking about pleasure or rewards and gets strength to endure what is hard and painful'.

Self-sacrifice is indeed the keynote here.

Self-sacrifice because her soul, "saw that it was good" (for we cannot doubt that George Eliot herself is speaking). But there is also in her books a deep undertone of sadness and bitterness, inevitable when the wider purpose of suffering is still undiscovered; and we claim that its real meaning is missed by those who would limit experience to that of one brief life no less than by those who deny a future existence.

No faith in the "love of God", in the "will of God", in the "all-wisdom of the Father", who, to justify our belief in his justice, must eventually make the crooked straight, can fully explain all that is involved in the nature of self-sacrifice.

Suffering that is intelligible — I am more especially thinking of mental suffering — seems to me the only suffering that is in any sense tolerable, and it is because Theosophy offers some explanation of the riddle that its adherents long that it should be understood, and that they strain every nerve to spread its knowledge.

If we believe that all variety of experience must be gained, why should we flinch from witnessing the darker forms of it in those we love. If they were spared now, it would meet them again in a future life, when we perchance should not be near to help them. We gain courage to face, and an insight into life, by this belief in reincarnation that nothing else can give. Think what George Eliot would have been, had she had this belief; how near she came to it none can tell; that she will reach it in the future one cannot doubt.

So far, then, I have trodden ground that may be said, in a sense, to be common alike to Theosophist, Christian and moralist. I have not dwelt upon the various forms and gradations of affection, for everyone can do this for himself, but have taken my stand upon the Theosophical conception of its value in the scheme of life, which scheme of life, be it remembered, differs to some extent from that offered by Christianity as generally conceived, as also from that of an ordinary moralist.

We are all, I suppose, agreed that the purer forms of affection are those alone which ennoble, that the conquest of self-love makes love for others possible. The question now is, Of what nature is this pure affection? whither does it lead? of what is it the expression or type? We, who believe implicitly in the law of analogy, cannot rest until we have got the answer. The answer is, that pure affection is of the *essential* nature, and is the only expression that we as yet can have, of that divine love which is not affection as we know it, but something that far transcends it. It is that divine love which we should strive to attain, and that until it is attained, all love, however pure, is tainted with personality.

Of this divine impersonal love, in its fulness, we have but a faint conception but compassion is the highest feeling that we can imagine, and happily for humanity there exist those who have reached this sublime compassion.

Compassion is not emotion or affection, because both must have passed away before a knowledge of them is won. While the battle is still raging the warrior is only conscious of the fight, his whole force, his whole energy is drawn into the struggle; not until the battle is over can he survey the ground, or is he at leisure to take thought for the wounded. Compassion as an emotion avails little, nay more, it may harm, and often it only means the inability to bear the burden of another's woe. We pity the beggar in the street, but to give him alms is often wrong; we pity a child in a passion, but he must be taught to control himself. [Page 9]

Pity is often thought to imply a feeling of superiority on the part of its possessor, but I think this is a mistake. The drunken man in his sober moments pities the young fellow whom he sees beginning to tread the same downward path — at least that pity is of a poor order which feels superior to its object, for it lacks imagination, and lack of imagination can only spring from lack of experience. For imagination must be, I think, the compounded experience of past lives which has not, as yet, become knowledge: we often have no actual experience in this life of the emotions which we can nevertheless understand and sympathise with.

Compassion is the highest feeling because it is the most potent for the salvation of humanity, and here it will be asked, Do you not see then in the death of Christ the culmination of self-sacrifice? What greater evidence of compassion could he give than by dying to save mankind? What more could be done for mankind than he has done?

Setting aside the question as to whether the Christ of the New Testament is an historical character, or rather supposing him for a moment to be so, I would say that the sacrifice of life is of course in a sense the culmination of self-sacrifice, in that, having spent life in the service of humanity, a man will also give up his life for it.

But unfortunately for Christianity it is the death of Christ rather than his life which has attracted paramount attention. The supposed doctrinal importance which is attached to this vicarious sacrifice has made his life and teaching a matter of merely secondary concern, and yet it is the record of his life, not the tragedy of Calvary, which testifies to his divinity. Many men have suffered a death as agonizing: none of whom we have any more than merely fragmentary knowledge have lived a life so ideally noble or taught a doctrine which so carries conviction with it to the heart of men. If we regard the death of Christ as part of a consistent whole, the necessary consummation of a life spent in the service of humanity, instead of an isolated episode having some miraculous efficacy which no understanding has yet been able to grasp, we should the better appreciate the lesson of his life and example. To live for humanity is harder than to die for it.

It is no light thing to renounce all that life can give, and to face what seems to us at this stage an eternity of lives for the sake of helping on humanity. But for the aspirant for adeptship is such a future in store, and that is not all, or nearly all. He must renounce, if he is true to his aspirations, spiritual bliss, so long

as there is one child of man deaf to the pleadings of his inner God.

It is not then to be wondered at that we reverence those whom we know have in past lives made their choice for this great renunciation, and who have thereby become benefactors of the race, and surely we may fitly point to an instance of compassion that was neither personal nor loveless. [Page 10]

What but compassion made the Founder of this Society face a world that heaped the vilest insults upon her and that mocked her every effort to raise it? What kept her toiling at her desk for twelve hours daily, with suffering body, and often with an aching heart, knowing as she *did know* how terribly this same mocking world stood in need of the help it refused to take, and which, like Jerusalem of old, despised and hated those who would show it any good?

She had the strength of compassion that never for an instant faltered and which made her more than woman. As woman she had the noblest and most affectionate nature — but her affection was perfectly controlled. To her the meanest and most despicable of human beings — provided the divine spark of soul was there — was as important, was as much entitled to her affectionate interest, as the foremost and most loyal of her friends.

In her we recognise the link which is possible while in the flesh between human affection and divine compassion. And what of the Masters of compassion of whom she was the faithful agent: those Masters who are actual living realities? Do we consider them to be gods? No — emphatically no — and why not? Because for each of us there exists but one Divinity — that Higher Self which is one in nature and in essence with the Absolute — the All.

The Masters, like ourselves, are servants of law. They are limited by matter. They still inhabit this globe which they tell us is the lowest and the grossest in our planetary chain. They can only help man in proportion as he helps himself. They are the link, if man will but seize it, between man and his own Divinity — here is no question of a vicarious atonement, no question of election or grace, no determination of who shall or who shall not be saved. They offer no forgiveness of sins, show no favour, desire no personal adoration. They endure "mental woe unspeakable" because of "helpless pity" for man.

No, They are not, They do not wish to be Gods, but none the less we owe Them profound and grateful reverence, and the ideal which They embody is capable of rousing the passionate enthusiasm of mankind. They are beyond personal emotion. They have no respect for persons, only for their good deeds, as one Master plainly says. They have overcome even the *passion* of pity, but They have attained to something infinitely transcending in degree any pity, any compassion we can comprehend. They tell us the way is hard, but that we may attain this condition if we will; and it is the possibility of obtaining this *cumulative* power to help our fellow creatures hereafter, that bids us struggle now with the lower personal self, that bids us renounce the Nirvana of today of personal ease, the desire for personal spiritual attainment, in order to work for others, if we would hope to be able to renounce the Nirvana of the future. [Page 11]

For, immeasurable as is the sacrifice of the Masters, the link must be complete, and they too stand on

the threshold of a still greater sacrifice, of a still more extended power, to shield man from ignorance. They may return as spirits to remain invisible watchers over mankind. They enter, the condition of Nirvana only to leave it. All attempt to realise the greatness of this sacrifice fails but miserably. We can only bow our heads in awe and gratitude. Of the great and wondrous Being, who is, so to speak, the personification of these watchers, or Nirmânâkayas, and who culminates in His nature our last ideal of compassion, it is said: —

" . . . Is this cold , . is this loveless ? Do we know anything in heaven or earth to compare with such loftiness? "