

Notes on Theosophy and Education

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THEOSOPHY claims to be the Science of Life, and must therefore have a direct bearing upon all those great problems which are agitating men's minds in these closing years of the 19th century. Among such problems, one of the most important, in its bearing upon the whole future of our race, as well as upon the next generation — to which will fall the task of carrying on the Theosophical movement till the last quarter of the coming century — is certainly that of Education. Hence it may not be amiss to call the attention of the readers of *Lucifer*, especially of those belonging to the Theosophical Society, to the bearing of Theosophical teaching upon this question. One fact alone need be pointed to in order to show how intimate and vital is the connection between Theosophy as embodied in the present Theosophical movement and the whole subject of Education. In every phase of human history, it is the ideal current among the people of any race as to the purpose and meaning of human life on earth, which is the most potent factor in determining the character and guiding spirit of the education given to the young generations of that nation. The education received by the young exercises an influence in moulding their conceptions of life and duty, and thus reacts upon the ideals of their mature years, and so upon future generations.

A passing glance along the galleries of human history may serve to illustrate this statement. [Page 18]

The earliest educational system of which we have any record is that of ancient India, embodied in the caste system. Under this *régime* the nation was divided into four main classes engaged, respectively: the Brahmans, in spiritual, religious, and scientific studies and pursuits; the Kshatriya, or warrior caste, in the pursuit of arms, politics, administration, in short the conduct and management of the outer national life generally; the Vaisya, or merchant caste, in commercial pursuits; while the Sudra, or "out caste" class, embraced all not included in one or other of these three.

This system, in one aspect, was an educational one, based upon a knowledge of the laws of Karma and Reincarnation. In accordance with these, it provided for the reincarnating Ego a determinate sphere of duties in accord with the Karmic affinities it had engendered in past incarnations. In each caste, the children were educated in accordance with the duties they would have to perform in adult life; the ideal expressing itself through the entire system being that each human being has his own specific sphere of duty to fill, a duty as necessary for the welfare of the nation as that of any other unit. The supreme ideal was that of duty, of national welfare on all planes, spiritual and intellectual as well as material. This, of course, applies strictly only to India in the days when it was still ruled by the occult hierarchy; though how deeply this ideal was impressed on the national mind may be judged from the language of the Bhagavad-gita. [The above statements and remarks must be understood to apply only to the India of the earliest times, when the nation was still ruled by the occult hierarchy, and the caste system, instead of being a

burden and an evil, as it is at present, was a sound and useful institution. Today, it is needless to say, the caste system is an almost unmixed evil, having degenerated into a matter of pure superstition and lost all its real, inner significance. But the good that, even in decay, it *has* wrought may be seen in the fact that the highest castes in India represent, even now, almost the finest and highest types of Aryan humanity in point of intellect and spirituality]

Leaving India for Egypt, we know only that its educational system was very complete and played a most important part in the national life.

In Greece, the division of education under the two heads of Music and Gymnastics, corresponded to, and expressed the nation's ideal of human life when that ideal existed in its purity. Perfect harmony and balance, whence result grace, beauty and truth, physical, intellectual and moral, was the goal of their striving, and this was the ideal which moulded the life of the race at its noblest and best.

For the Roman, Rome, her power and greatness, was the ideal to which life was to be devoted. Educated in the Forum and the Senate House, the palmy days of Roman history show us a series of heroic figures expressing the national ideal in the life of the camp, the conduct of the state, and the sterner virtues of private life. [Page 19]

Carried away by the torrent of reaction, against the corruption and materialism of the decaying Roman Empire, Christianity stamped upon the early centuries of our era the ideal of a selfish other-worldliness. A narrow, individualistic, unhuman ideal, exhibiting itself in the utter want of any true education characterizing that period.

But even such an ideal, purely individual and tainted by selfishness as it was, was surely after all preferable to the baseness of the Mammon-worship, the making of Gold-getting the end, aim and object of life, which is so rapidly becoming the ruling spirit of our own age. It is this ideal, this utterly selfish and material conception of the purpose of life, this regarding of our existence here as having for its sole object pleasure and self-gratification, for the attainment of which money is the means — it is this spirit which is rapidly permeating the whole educational system of Europe, and especially of England.

But Theosophy holds up before the men and women of this generation a new ideal, to impress which upon the spirit of our time is the real task of the Theosophical Society, the true object for which the Theosophical movement was set in motion. This ideal is the Universal Brotherhood of Mankind, conceived not as an arbitrary assertion, not on any one plane of nature alone, but realized as a basic, fundamental fact in nature, on each and every plane, realized as implying the actual, real, solidarity of each human unit with all others, the inextricable interweaving of the pain and pleasure, the success and failure, the happiness and misery of each with all. It is to stamp this ideal in lines of radiant light on the consciousness of men that the Theosophical movement was called into existence, not to teach occult anthropology or to gratify curiosity concerning the hidden forces of nature.

With such a mission before it, Theosophy must obviously have a direct and most important bearing upon education, some thoughts upon which may be of interest as suggesting lines of effort and of practical

work to the earnest student, who desires to put his Theosophy into practice.

First, then, the basic idea itself of Theosophy — the solidarity of the human race — demands with no uncertain accent universal education for *all*, men and women, rich and poor, alike. It requires that every human being shall have the fullest opportunity, the largest measure of assistance that can be given, in developing himself, in actualizing the potentialities latent in him as completely and harmoniously as possible. To secure such help and opportunity to all, should be the task of the nation, as representing its component units in their collectivity. Surely when Theosophy teaches so forcibly the vastly greater importance of [Page 20] the Mind over the Body, there can be no shadow of doubt for any Theosophist, that it is our bounden duty, individually and collectively, to work for the bringing about of a state of things wherein every human being shall have the fullest opportunity for harmonious mental unfoldment — *harmonious*, not only in and with himself, but even more in and with that Humanity of which he forms a part.

Here we find at once a most vital practical lesson that Theosophy has to teach with regard to our present-day mode of education. It is the ideals which are stamped on the minds of the young, not only by the *words* of their teachers, but far more by the methods of education, by the living influence of the life at school, by the conversation and example of their elders at home — it is the ideals thus formed which practically mould and determine the character of our entire after-lives. From story-books, from fiction, still more from the biographies of those held up to us as "great" and "noble" men and women, our minds receive the impressions that later will colour all our thought and action. But the whole spirit of modern education, of modern life, is deep dyed, through and through, with individualistic ideals. The principle of "competition", of the "struggle for existence", pervades every branch of education. With every year "competitive examinations", and the preparations for them, become more and more the dominant idea in our educational institutions. The plan of "taking places" in class brings the same principle into the daily and hourly life of every boy and girl. The same ideal is held up before their eyes in the biographies of those whom they are incited to imitate. To be successful above one's fellows, to hold the first place, to succeed oneself, to conquer, surpass, out-do others in every department of human activity, is the goal for which each is urged to strive. This is not true emulation, for the object set before us is not to do one's uttermost that *all* may be benefited; but on the contrary that all others may stand on a lower step, beaten and conquered. Selfishness and individualism are thus inculcated by the strongest of all means, constant object-lessons, from our earliest days, till we learn to forget all about men in general, to think and work only for ourselves and those who directly form a part of our personal interests. Thus, in its leading ideal, its fundamental principle, its constant practice, modern education is distinctly *anti*-theosophical, and the tendency at present is to render it, with every day, more completely so. Against these false ideals, it is the duty of every Theosophist to strive with hand and voice. If we believe in Universal Brotherhood, then we should bring up all those, with whose education we have any concern, to work their [Page 21] best, to strive unceasingly after attainment, in order that not themselves only, but ALL MEN may be benefited.

It would be easy to bring this home to children, to make human solidarity a living fact in their consciousness, by rewarding the successful *individual* by some pleasure — a holiday or what not — given to *all* his schoolmates; A child would thus feel and experience the fact that the real reward of his efforts and exertions comes to him *through* his fellows — not *apart* from them, as is now the case with our system of prize-giving.

In brief; the leading idea of education from the Theosophical standpoint, should be to teach men to use

their *personalities* — *i.e.*, their physical "selves" — as *tools* for the benefit of all, instead of, as now, teaching them to consider their personalities, their own selfish enjoyment and success, as the end and object of exertion, of study, of life itself.

It is on this subject of the ideals inculcated upon children, theoretically and practically, that Theosophy has the most direct bearing. For upon the ideal held up as the highest goal of attainment depend, obviously, the whole tone and spirit of education. But this is not all; and the Theosophist has at least a word to say upon the general character of the methods adopted in our schools and colleges at present.

The tendency of the day is to overload the memory with facts and details. Education is understood to be the cramming of the mind with facts, with other people's thoughts and theories — to be, in short, the cultivation of the memory rather than of the mind proper. Such a method is contrary, one would think, to the plainest common sense, let alone to Theosophical teaching. Holding, as the latter does, that you cannot teach anything the germ of which does not already exist in the pupil's mind, a Theosophical educator would seek rather to draw out, than to put in; to foster and develop such germs of aptitudes and abilities as were present in the pupil, and above all to strengthen and assist him in learning to think for himself. The machine-made knowledge of our present schools, the endless and meaningless array of facts, historical, political, scientific, etc., which our children have to commit to memory, Theosophy regards as not only useless, but as positively injurious. To begin with, of all this memory-knowledge there remains but an infinitesimal portion two or three years after the examinations are passed and done with. Then this overtaking of the memory with idle and needless details and facts, lacking totally organic connection, stunts the general mental growth and wastes the mental power which [Page 22] should have been used to promote the growth of the thinking faculty itself. Theosophy regards a harmonious, well-balanced development of the mental faculties, the growth and strengthening of the power of original thought, above all, the realization of the actual, living, organic, unity of the human race, as the true ideal of education. "Knowledge", *i.e.*, an acquaintance with *facts*, is necessary indeed, but should be subordinated strictly to the power of assimilating those facts and understanding them.

If we believe in Reincarnation, it is obvious that what remains to us as the permanent acquisition distilled from each personal life, is — not a knowledge of *facts* — but the developed mental growth and power of understanding and dealing with them. Here again we see how the materialistic spirit of our age is at work in the enforcement of false conceptions of education, and another instance is before us of the crying need which pervades the world for the spread and teaching of Theosophical truth.