

SOME REFLECTIONS ON A THEOSOPHICAL WORLD-VIEW

By Emily Sellon

The world-view of every individual is compounded of many dimensions of experience (including those that are tacit and unacknowledged as well as those which are consciously affirmed), but it is fundamentally based on one's conception of reality. When we speak of the world, we do not mean the facts of existence of the things and events we encounter, but rather the basic set of metaphors in terms of which everything is interpreted. It is these which constitute our personal reality: the truth as we perceive it, the way in which the world as a whole is present to us.

Every age and every culture develops its own prevailing world-view, and every individual who is born into a culture must participate in it. We are all both responsible for and responsive to the world we live in. Even if we see our role as actively standing against the prevailing world-view and struggling to change it, that role has been created for us by our circumstance.

Even those of us who seek the values that transcend material benefit still suffer the limiting conditions of our culture, for they represent a particular, pervasive way of looking at, and therefore of seeing, the world we live in: in this case, a world whose reality is primarily material, and which measures excellence by reward and recognition. (And how many of us can easily resist the value of success?)

Such conditioning is, of course, the result of karma; it is a universal, not-to-be-avoided human attribute. This fact can and does represent opportunity as well as limitation if we recognize it in ourselves, and determine to be conditioned not by the part but by the whole, as Lama Govinda recommends. But this requires a clear perception of why we reject the prevailing world-view and what we propose to establish in its place, remembering always that people respond to ideals only when they see them as real possibilities for a better life.

We who are theosophists aspire to promulgate a world-view which is founded upon theosophical principles. But since our world is but one set of metaphors for interpreting reality (and there are obviously many, many others), we have to recognize that a theosophical world-view is not the theosophical world-view to end all world-views. Obviously, there can be an endless number of different ways to interpret and apply theosophical principles in different contexts (as the great religions testify); what we are seeking is an interpretation that is preeminently suited to our own times. This cannot be quite the same as earlier interpretations, which had a different context and therefore different needs and goals. In the 19th century, theosophical teachings emerged from a long seclusion in order to act as a catalyst within a world that was in the process of disintegration and reformation. One hundred years later, the quickening of change and the widely acknowledged need for a cultural self-transformation appeal for a fresh theosophical impulse. Today's world badly needs a new set of metaphors, because it

certainly is not able to manage its realities on the old terms. Thus it seems to me that another formulation of the teachings is required of us: one that will use the insights privileged to us in the way they were always intended—for the betterment of the human condition.

The thrust toward a new world-view (or paradigm, as it is often called) is widely recognized, but the impulse is confused and amorphous, and the outcome doubtful. At this critical point, theosophy could exert a positive influence. But how do we make this influence felt? Only, it seems to me, by showing that a shift in vision can illuminate the world in a fresh and more realistic way— meaning that it can give us a better grip on reality. A theosophical world-view can integrate many newly achieved insights, but only if this world-view is consistently searched for its values, and applied to here-and-now life situations. Unfortunately this is not yet the case. We theosophists have perhaps failed so far to work through the doctrine to the degree that it inevitably forms the heart of our personal reality—the central metaphor in terms of which all experience becomes meaningful and value-laden.

Nonetheless, theosophical principles are constantly generating their consequences for those who seek them, and these consequences emerge as signposts along the way: criteria of truth, standards for judgment and action, ideals against which to measure our aspirations. These are not dogmas designed to tell us how to think, but guidelines to keep us from getting lost in the wilderness of contemporary information and opinion.

To take an example, science is rapidly developing a cosmology that accords with theosophy in many important respects, and this strengthens our hope for a new and better paradigm in terms of which to interpret our world. Nevertheless, there are still large and influential areas of science which remain fixed in the old narrow, mechanistic world-view, even though some of their developments may sound vaguely “theosophical.” Theosophists only weaken their case when they too quickly and uncritically embrace such developments. Or to take another instance, the explosion of interest in altered states of consciousness and their implication has opened up a new view of the range of human possibility; it affirms the theosophical principle that consciousness is a primary datum in the world. But again, we should be aware of the dubious directions some of this interest is taking, for the so-called spiritual domains being explored are from the theosophical point of view only a different order of materiality, subject to their own limitations. How do we handle these contradictions? Discriminate among the various claims? These and other problems point up the importance of articulating the theosophical world-view more clearly, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world.

What then, are the distinguishing features of any theosophical world-view? It is easy to generalize. One can say that it is characterized by a fundamental altruism, a respect for all life, a holistic approach to problems, an acceptance of change and growth, an insistence on the intrinsic order and intelligibility of the cosmos, a recognition of the unique value of the individual and of the spiritual ground of the material world. No

one of these positions, however, is unique to theosophists. What theosophy does uniquely provide is a unified network of meaning within which each of these attributes (and many others) finds its cause as well as its justification, so that it becomes the inevitable referent for behavior and action at all levels. It is for this reason that the theosophical world-view can furnish both the all-encompassing context and the specific criteria for human behavior: at once a cosmology, a scientific orientation, a philosophical position, a working psychology, a prescription for individual and social action, and a motivation for personal growth and self-transformation.

In order to develop theosophical principles into a contemporary world-view, it seems to me we need to relate them in an organic way. If this is our object, we should be willing to subject the rich tapestry of theosophical teachings to critical analysis, and to discriminate among them in terms of contemporary needs. This may seem offensively arbitrary to many members, but it is not without precedent. We must remember that theosophical doctrines are primarily meant to be *useful* to human beings; this has been made quite clear in the literature. We seek truth in order to apply it to circumstance, and since circumstances are always changing, there can never be any final statement of truth. In this case, we should be trying to restate the theosophical world-view in a way that can once again make visible some of the truths which human beings desperately need, in order to return to our world the sense of value and meaning it has lost. Because theosophical teachings are profoundly paradoxical, and often confront one truth with another, higher truth, this isn't an easy task. The point of departure, however, is clear.

The origin of all theosophical teaching, its most fundamental tenet, is a radical non-dualism. Reality is unpartable, beyond all conditioning; it at once transcends existence and permeates every aspect of the world. Thus theosophy never advocates the supremacy of either spirit or matter, or admits the separation of mind from the material world. It emphatically denies all dualistic interpretations of the world and every attempt at reductionism, whether religious or scientific. This position is basic to its world-view.

This radical non-dualism extends itself into every perception of natural phenomena and every question about the meaning and purpose of life. For example, since consciousness (or spirit) is an intrinsic ingredient of existence, without which it would not be, every existent being (whether animate or so-called inanimate) embodies this universal in some form suited to its inner necessities. Consciousness, therefore, must enter into every consideration of the natural as well as the human world; no view of life can be called complete that does not pursue the role of mind in the formative processes of nature. On the other hand, consciousness can never make its appearance or function creatively without a suitable form; its flowering is absolutely dependent upon the complexification and ultimate perfectibility of the material world. Therefore, spirit and matter are coterminous in the universe, two faces of the same reality. As the Buddha said, nirvana and samsara are one.

Thus the theosophical world-view is phenomenological, but rooted in what Fritz Kunz always called a transcendental realism. Because of this, it is able to reconcile the

presence of abiding ideal realities (in Plato's sense) with the problematic nature of existence, and accept the relativity of the sensed world and the uniqueness of individual selfhood as in no way diminishing the wholeness and unity of the world. This has all sorts of consequences. It makes it possible to appreciate the paradoxical nature of truth and the multidimensionality of the world, to live with uncertainty, to open ourselves to change as the character of all becoming, and to acknowledge our responsibility for the world—all in the conscious certainty that it is the self which is enriched thereby.

Theosophical teachings have elaborated this fundamental non-dualism into a many-faceted description of the world which sometimes appears over-detailed, confusing, and contradictory. This bothers some people, but to me constitutes its strength. For life itself is full of contradiction, and truth is multidimensional. Only when we become tolerant of this situation can we begin to disentangle ourselves from the web of our own opinions and prejudices, and begin to perceive the inner meaning and value of our necessitous world.

We are told that the infinite creativity of the Divine Mind (the Logos principle) finds its quintessential expression in man's creative ability to shape his world and realize his own destiny—his dharma. Throughout history, men have selected as a basis for action (however misguided) those truths which seemed to apply most powerfully with the parameters they have set for themselves. After all, the most fundamental freedom man has is the one which permits him to make his own mistakes. The fact that human vision is flawed only emphasizes the importance of our continuing struggle to catch glimpses of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful through the murk of our condition.

So man will always keep on creating the world according to his present vision of reality, for it is his nature to do so. As Plotinus said, it is the ability of Intelligence "to produce all things by always thinking in the same manner, yet continually with new difference." The world we intelligent beings produce will always be preeminently a human world, but its quality—whether more or less compassionate, humane, unselfish, enlightened—will depend upon the "new difference" in our perception of ancient truths. Is the new set of metaphors for reality which we are now developing going to embody the best of human insights, or the most insubstantial of human cravings?

At this critical moment in time, when everything important seems to hang in the balance, the weight of theosophical principles might just tip the scales. But for this to happen, I believe that they must be newly perceived, the theosophical world-view newly applied—not in a fragmentary way, but as the seamless garment it really is: unifying, immediate, conforming to (that is, formed for) the insistent needs of our times.