

March 2010

FACTS AND PRINCIPLES

Many people find reading *The Secret Doctrine* to be a difficult undertaking, quickly becoming discouraged and giving up in frustration. Why is it such a daunting task? There may be many reasons, but one frequent complaint is that “it’s too abstract.” The unspoken implication here is that the highly abstract principles described in *The Secret Doctrine* have little to do with everyday life. This raises an interesting philosophical question: Is an abstraction less real than something that is tangible? Is an abstraction less relevant to our lives than something we can see and touch with our own hands? It seems that for some people, a concrete object is more real than any abstract principle. So let us consider the relation between a fact and a principle.

Scientific folklore has it that Isaac Newton formulated his theory of gravity after observing an apple fall to the ground. What was of significance was not the fact that an apple had fallen to the ground, but the discovery gravity. Would it have made any difference if the falling object had been a ripe orange, or even a coconut? A falling grapefruit or pineapple would have demonstrated the principle of gravity just as effectively. Clearly the falling object is not what was important, but rather the scientific law behind the action. What Newton observed was merely the outer and temporary effect of a timeless principle at work—the law of gravity.

The human mind has the capacity to think in both concrete and abstract terms. When we think of a dog, we can think of a particular dog or we can think of dogs in general. Theosophy refers to the higher and lower mind, but these are terms used to describe two very different functions of a single mind. The observation of empirical data is a function of the lower mind, as when we remember the color, shape, and texture of a piece of clothing. Thinking in terms of concepts and principles, such as justice, truth, and beauty, is a function of the higher mind. As human beings, we need and use both faculties.

The multitude of strange terms and stories in *The Secret Doctrine* can easily lead to a state of confusion if the reader loses sight of the fundamental principles involved—unity, polarity, and periodicity. If you find yourself struggling with *The Secret Doctrine*, overwhelmed by obscure terms and esoteric arcana, this is a sign that you have become bogged down in the minutia of details while losing sight of the overarching principles.

Incidentally, there is a direct parallel here to how we live our lives. Without a set of guiding principles, we are like a boat without a rudder out on the open sea. Statements of principles *are* abstract, but once understood, we can rely on them with confidence to help us navigate the inevitable storms and vicissitudes of life.

David P. Bruce is the National Secretary of the Theosophical Society in America.