

Applied Theosophy by H.S. Olcott

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PEOPLE speak of pure mathematics and applied mathematics; the former belong properly to the region of the ideal, not of the ideal in the sense of the fanciful, for there is nothing less fanciful than mathematics, but the ideal in the sense of the metaphysical, which is the really real; the latter is the very imperfect expression of the former in terms of matter, and roughly utilized for the purposes of this mundane existence. Now it is a question which demands the very serious attention of the Fellows of this Society, whether there does not exist something which bears the same relation to "pure Theosophy" that applied mathematics bear to pure. If "applied Theosophy" expresses any real idea, what is implied in the term? Can the Fellows of the Theosophical Society apply their knowledge to the affairs of our mundane existence? Is it possible to materialize, however imperfectly, the great mass of high aspirations and altruistic sentiments that have accumulated in the literature of Theosophy and in the souls of Theosophists, and which at present, for want of an outlet, seem to threaten us with a congestion of spirituality?

The first question that naturally arises is, whether the action of the Theosophical Society in every respect should be limited to its declared Objects. On the general principle that every one should mind his own business, the presumption is in favor of this view. No one on joining our Society relinquishes his right to take a personal part in any other movement for the benefit of his fellow men, nor escapes his duty of doing so. But every "Cause" has its special organization and organs, and pre-empted field of work, and if the Objects of the Theosophical Society are taken seriously by its Fellows, are they not enough to occupy very fully all the time and energy these are likely to be able to spare from the routine business of life? Of the three Objects, two are distinctly separated from everything else. The study of Eastern philosophies, religions and sciences, and the investigation of the obscure forces in Nature and powers in man, are specialties, which have little or no direct connection with the altruism which it is the peculiar function of Theosophy as an ethical system to publish to the world; more than this, they may be said to be both of them unsocial in their nature, since their tendency is to isolate anyone who seriously occupies himself with them from sympathetic intercourse with his neighbors. The first Object is altogether different. To "form the nucleus of Universal Brotherhood," so far from conducing to retirement and concentration, is a purpose so high, so deep, so broad, so universally sympathetic, so distant of realization, that it becomes vague and confused when the attention is directed to it, and to most Fellows this Object is about equivalent in practice to the formation of a nucleus for the recurrence of the Golden Age, or for the re-establishment of the Garden of Eden.

Now, experience proves, what reason might have foreseen, that a comparatively small proportion of the Fellows of the Society take up seriously either of the two *contracting* Objects, and that only an exceptionally enthusiastic Brother is *moved to action* by the *expanding* one; from which it follows that as far as concerns any activity or good influence in the *practical* affairs of life, the Fellows as a corporate body might as well be shut up in a little community like the Shakers, from whom the world hears once in

every ten years or so.

If this, however, were all there were in the Theosophical Society, it would never have become the well-known, by many much esteemed, and, in certain quarters, roundly abused, institution that it is. The fact is that those who join the Society bring into it their knowledge and their activity, and the reputation of the Society has been built up by the individual efforts of its Fellows. Take away *Isis Unveiled*; *The Secret Doctrine*; *Light on the Path*; *Esoteric Buddhism*; *Theosophy, Religion, and the Occult Science*, and half a dozen other works, together with Theosophical magazines -- all of them distinctly due to personal effort — and what would be left of the renown or notoriety of the Society? Since, however, the Theosophical Society is composed of its Fellows, and is what its Fellows make it, to say all that is in no way to disparage the Society, any more than it would detract from the beauty or utility of a Coral Island in the South Seas, to say that it owed its existence to the individual labors of the little lives that raised it from the bottom of the ocean. It is a mass of coral cells certainly, but it is something more it is a coral Island, with an added individuality of its own.

What the Society has hitherto done — its great merit in the eyes of some, and its terrible fault in the estimation of others — is *to make people think*. No one can for long belong to the Theosophical Society without beginning to question *himself*. He begins to ask himself: “How do I know that?”. “Why do I believe this?” “What reason have I to be so certain that I am right, and so sure that my neighbors are wrong?” “What is my warrant for declaring this action, or that practice, to be good, and their opposite bad?” The very air of Theosophy is charged with the spirit of enquiry. It is not the “skeptical” spirit, nor is it the “agnostic”. It is a real desire to know and to learn the truth, as far as it is possible for any creature to know it who is so limited by his capacities and so biased by his prejudices as is man. It is *that* which has raised the Theosophical Society above the level of all other aggregations or organizations of men, and which, so long as its Fellows abstain from dogmatizing, must keep it on an altogether higher plane. To the Theologian, to the Philosopher, to the Skeptic, to the Spiritualist, to the Materialist, it says the same thing — study man and Nature, and compare what you find there with your own pre-existing ideas and theories. In proportion as anyone follows this advice he spontaneously inclines towards Theosophy, which is the least common multiple and greatest common measure of all the “ists,” the “tys” and the “isms”. There is nothing in the Objects of the Society which would enable any person unacquainted with its history to divine from them alone what would be the ideas of a Fellow of the Society upon almost any subject. The fact is that the Theosophical Society attracts persons who have got a natural disposition to examine, analyze, reflect; and when this tendency does not exist — when people join the Society from special sympathy with one or more of its Objects — they very soon begin to ponder over the problems of existence, for they find themselves involuntarily and instinctively subjecting their own pet theories and cherished weaknesses to the process of examination which is the slogan of the Society. The result of an examination thus candidly made is almost invariably a view of life and of the universe in more or less resemblance to that of the Eastern religions and philosophies when these are purified of their superstition and priest-made masks. It is a mistake to imagine that what is known as Theosophy at present has been learned from the writings of the ancients; it is *an* independent growth in the modern mind which to many appears spontaneous, because they cannot discern whence the seeds come. Theosophy, like man himself, has many different sources. All Science, all Philosophy, all Religion, are its progenitors; it appears when the seed of an enquiring spirit is dropped into a personal soil sufficiently unprejudiced and altruistic to give it nourishment. The modern world is thinking out the problems of life in the rough, and then comparing its conclusions with the ideas of the ancients by way of corroborating or verifying them. Here and there a Fellow of the Society outside of India may be found who is willing to accept the Eastern Initiates, whether ancient or modern, as teachers; but the majority prefer to think and theorize for

themselves, which is, after all, the best way for anyone to learn who can think and theorize logically.

We have, then, a Society without opinions, but with certain "Objects", certain principles, and certain methods, and we have as a result a tendency to certain modes of thought, and certain theories of the Universe, to which theories the name of Theosophy has been given, and when these theories are examined, they are found not only to resemble those contained in the Eastern systems of philosophy, but a closer scrutiny shows that the very same ideas, only sadly mutilated, underlie all religions, and are contained in a more or less diluted form in all philosophies. Not only this: a careful comparison of the root of the Theosophical system with the latest discoveries and most advanced conjectures of modern science, and of recent experimental research in the borderland between physics and metaphysics shows an extraordinary agreement between them. We are advancing step by step; a student can take in at a time from a teacher only a very small addition to the knowledge which he already possesses, and the fact that *The Secret Doctrine* has been so generally understood and so highly appreciated by Theosophists, shows that their own thoughts were not so very much behind the ideas *given out* in that marvelous work.

All this, however, is only what may be called the intellectual or philosophical side of Theosophy; and it is the fruit of the Theosophical Society's influence only in one direction. Those who come under the influence of the Theosophic spirit are affected ethically as well as philosophically. The same causes which produce a certain tendency in *thought* produce also a disposition to *act* in a certain manner. The habit of viewing the Universe and men's lives as a divinely wonderful system, in which progress towards ultimate perfection by means of conscious effort is the furthest analysis which we can make of the purpose of existence, results in a desire to exert the necessary effort in order to ensure for ourselves, and for those whom we can help, as much of that progress as is realizable at present. It is impossible for anyone seriously to believe that this world is governed by a law of absolute justice — that as we sow, so shall we reap — without finding his ideas of the value of life, and of the things of life, radically affected thereby. If it be in our power to become larger and stronger beings, richer in ourselves and happier in our lives, no one but a fool would refuse to avail himself of the means of attaining to that happier and higher state. If it be possible to help others to reach it, no one but a selfish and unsympathetic wretch would refuse to his neighbor the helping hand for which he feels he would himself be grateful. The consequence is that along with enlargement of the mind there takes place an enlargement of the sympathies as the result of Theosophic studies, and both of these conduce to the moral growth of the individual. This moral growth exhibits itself in two ways, internally and externally. The individual in whom it takes place begins to regulate and purify his own life; he casts away from him all that he feels will keep him weak and silly, and cultivates those habits and those qualities that he knows will make him strong. He also tried to induce his neighbors to enter the upward path, and endeavors to help those who show a disposition to turn away from the harmful and the idiotic, which form so large a proportion of the affairs of men's lives at present. The help he can be to single individuals is comparatively small; for the work they, like himself, have to do at first is the rectifying of their own faults and the purifying of their own motives, and this every man must necessarily do for himself; and a neighbor, however anxious to assist, can do but little more than exhort and encourage him. But over and above these personal faults and evils, there are others which affect a great number of persons together, against which any single individual is powerless. Even were the dislike and fear of those wider evils general, and every one agreed that they ought to be put down, still unless a united attack be made upon them they cannot be abated, for individuals can make no impression on them, and they are strong enough to resist the attack of a mob. To combat them requires unanimity and organization. Every Fellow of the Society feels in his heart a strong wish to aid to the best of his ability in diminishing and if possible, destroying these evils. He sees

that their existence is completely incompatible with any success in establishing a nucleus of Universal Brotherhood. He knows that they have their root deep down in human selfishness, and that they are supported by many existing institutions, political, social and religious — to which they are firmly attached by established customs and vested interests.

Now it is at that point that the hitch occurs. The Theosophical Society is not supposed to promulgate opinions concerning social matters, any more than it is supposed to do so concerning religious matters; and as for politics, they are strictly prohibited to the Fellows, as Fellows, by the Constitution and Rules of the Society, although *personally* they may and often do take an active interest therein. Again, if anyone proposes that the Theosophical Society shall take any part in the war against the practical evils of life, it is answered that, as has been previously said, each evil has already got a special organization to oppose it. There are special Societies for the suppression of drunkenness, of cruelty, of immorality in various forms; also for the furtherance of every kind of benevolent work; were the Theosophical Society therefore to interest itself in these things, not only would it be going out of its legitimate province, but it would be an interloper in the fields which others have got a prescriptive right to occupy. Now this would be a serious argument, but for one very obvious consideration; namely, that since the Theosophical Society has professedly, as a body, no opinion on any subject, it is equally a transgression of its basic principles for it to sustain or promulgate any special system of philosophy, as in practice it decidedly does, under the name of "Theosophy". The Theosophical Society may be, and nominally is, a Society for the stimulation of enquiry and research, overshadowed by the somewhat vague idea of the ultimate realization of human brotherhood; but we have seen already that those who enter the Society either possess already or very soon acquire, certain definite habits of mind and ways of viewing the Universe, which are denoted and connoted by the terms Theosophy and Theosophist. Now it is distinctly as a result of these ideas and habits that there arises a desire, not indeed peculiar to Theosophists, but inseparable from Theosophy, to rid the world of evil practices and evil forces; and it follows logically that the desire to act rightly is as much a consequence of a connection with Theosophy as the desire to think rightly; and that therefore both are natural, spontaneous, and inevitable consequences of Fellowship in the Theosophical Society and equally within the legitimate sphere of the Society, whether manifested individually, or by the united effort of a part, or of the whole of the Fellows. A Theosophist is necessarily imbued with what was called in the Middle Ages, and is called to this day by those who are still in the mediaeval condition of mind, a hatred of Satan and all his works. To combat evil actively is, in fact, the ungratified desire at present of thousands of Fellows of the Society, and it is chiefly because there is now no outlet for their activity in that direction, which takes their attention off of themselves and away from each other, that quarrels and scandals occur among its Fellows. Only a small percentage of the Fellows care very much to work at Occultism, and now there is a separate division of the Society set apart for that purpose, under a Teacher eminently qualified to teach *real* Occultism if she only had pupils capable of learning it.

This, then, is the problem, and it is of all the problems presented to us at the present moment that which is of most importance to the Theosophical Society: Having prepared themselves by study and self-development to take an active part in the warfare against evil, can any means be devised whereby the Fellows of the Society can apply their knowledge and their energies to the practical affairs of life? *Practical Theosophy* is an affair of the future. *Applied Theosophy* is a more modest ambition, and is, or ought to be, a possibility.

Now it is evident that no greater mistake could be made than to open little departments in the Society itself for different special purposes. A Temperance division, Social purity division, a Woman's rights

division, an Anti-cruelty division, would be so many mistakes, unless the intention were similar to that which was manifested in the establishment of the Esoteric Division — to isolate a certain group of Fellows from the main work of the Society, for the mutual benefit of all concerned. It would be a blunder, not only because these special divisions would intrude upon the work now being done by special organizations, but also because the *real work of the Theosophical Society is, and always must be, accomplished upon the plane of ideas, not on that of material things*. Moreover any specialization of functions tends not only to develop a particular part, but also to draw into that part all that appertains to the exercise of that function, previously contained in the other parts. Already the effect of clearly divided Objects has been the formation in the Society of unrecognized but not unreal divisions, in the shape of groups which are exclusively addicted to psychic experiments, to the philosophy of the Hindus, to ethics of Buddhism, or to the speculations of modern Western thinkers. Were the Fellows encouraged to follow their natural affinities in the application of their Theosophy to the affairs of life, as they do their predilections for the study of Theosophy in one or other of its various aspects, they would become still more one-sided and partially developed Theosophists than they are at present, and this further isolation of its Fellows from one another would tend to weaken the Society still more as a united body.

If the Fellows of the Theosophical Society are to apply their Theosophy to the affairs of life, it must be through the Society, and as individual units of the whole — not as isolated individuals. It is well known that in metaphysics two and two do not make four but five, and that the fifth is frequently by far the most important part of the sum. The same idea is expressed in the fable of the bundle of sticks; tied together they are unbreakable, singly they can be snapped with ease. Union or unity adds certain qualities and powers that were not there before, and the vehicle in which these powers reside is the unit which is added to the number of the sticks by tying them together. It is this mystic individuality, “the sum total”; that gives strength to all societies and congregations of men, and becomes the real dominating power, to which all contribute some of their force and which stands behind every unit and lends its whole strength to it. Without it a Fellow of the Theosophical Society would be as powerless as any other isolated man or woman in the community. With it behind him an F.T.S is a power in proportion to the unity and singleness of purpose of the Society to which he belongs. Who speaks when a priest of the Roman Catholic Church utters a command? *The united power of the Church of Rome*. Who speaks when a disrobed priest says something? *A nonentity*. Who speaks when the Judge, the General, the Statesman open their mouths? “The State — the tremendous and often tyrannical personality that comes into life and action when the units that composed it are bound together, through organization, by a common will and a common purpose.

It is this added increment, and this only, that gives to the Theosophical Society its extraordinary, and to many unaccountable, power. Weak in numbers, contemptible in organization, distracted by personal jealousies, subject to constant endeavors on the part of ambitious individuals to break it up into pieces which they can distribute among themselves, the Theosophical Society is a power in the world notwithstanding all the assaults that are made upon it by outsiders, and the disintegrating influences within. Why? Because upon a plane higher than the physical the Fellows are united and strong. They are united in their ideas of the purpose of life, and of the government of the Universe — in other words, they are strong in that they are individual cells composing the body called the Theosophical Society, as it exists in both the physical and the spiritual worlds.

Quarrel as they may among themselves, be as small and provincial as they choose, the Fellows of the Society cannot help contributing their little quota of Theosophical ideas to that united whole idea which is

the spirit of the Theosophical Society, and therefore its very life and real self. And those who attack the Society are frequently its supporters; for they attack it on the external plane, while, unknown to themselves in spite of themselves, they support it upon the plane where its real life is passed, for those who are its enemies are generally ignorant of its true nature, and are frequently themselves imbued with eminently Theosophic ideas and aspirations, which nourish the Society on the ideal plane, and constantly tend to draw those in whom they exist, more and more in the direction of the Theosophical Society in its materialized form on earth.

If then the real power of Theosophy in the world is exercised in the realm of thought; and if the direction in which that power is exerted is a natural consequence of the growth of certain ideas in the minds of those who carry out the objects of the Society, it stands to reason that the gigantic evils of our modern world must be attacked with immaterial weapons and in the intellectual and moral planes. How can this be accomplished? Simply by perceiving the fact, understanding it and acknowledging it. Then the actual work will be accomplished quietly, almost silently, and apparently spontaneously, just as the great reforming work of the Society is now being accomplished — by individuals — who, while contributing to the strength of the Society, draw from it in return a force that gives to their utterances an importance and a power which had they spoken as isolated individuals, and not as Fellows of the Society, their words would not have had.

There does not, and can not, exist the slightest doubt as to the direction in which the power of the Theosophical Society would be applied in practical things. If the tendency of Fellowship in the Society is to develop certain habits of philosophic thought, its tendency is even stronger to give rise to definite ethical views and moral principles. However much and bitterly the Fellows may disagree as to the duration of Devachan or the number and viability of the Principles in man, or any other point of occult doctrine, it would be hard to get up a dispute among the brethren as to the evil of intemperance, or the abomination of cruelty, or about any other of the crying sins of our times. Not only is that the case but they would all give the same reasons, for their detestation of these evils, reasons founded on their Theosophical ideas and principles. Still, of what avail or utility to the world are their ideas and wishes in these matters at present? Who cares to have the good-word or influence of the Theosophical Society for any benevolent movement, any reform, or any attempt to do justice? *No One*. There is not a “cause” today that would not rather see the minister of some microscopic Christian sect on the platform at its Annual Meeting than the most prominent member of the Theosophical Society — for the good and sufficient reason that the Rev Gentleman would carry with him the unseen but not unfelt influence and authority of the body to which he belongs, while the F.T.S would represent nothing but himself. This condition of things should not exist, and all that is needed to remedy it is for all of us to see and understand that *the ethical* is just as much a part of the Theosophical idea, and just as much the business of the Fellows of the Society as *the philosophical*.

But it is only as a united whole that the Theosophical Society can ever be a power in the world for good, or a vehicle for the exercise of the altruistic efforts of its Fellows. The action of the Theosophical Society is on the plane of ideas, which is the plane of realities, in that material things are but pre-existing ideals brought down into this earthly sphere. The Theosophical Society does not mean a number of little coteries, nor a few larger coteries composed of a collection of the smaller ones. It does not mean a few hundred Presidents of little Branches, or half a score of “General Secretaries”, it does not mean even the Fellows that compose the Society at any particular time, for these come and go and the Society remains intact, as the cells of the body change, while the body remains the same person, animated by the same

spirit. The real Theosophical Society is an indivisible unit, animated by an individual life! Its soul is the love of truth, its vital principle is kindness, and it dwells in a world above the material, where no enemy can touch it. It depends for its manifestation on earth upon an appropriate vehicle, and the first condition necessary in that vehicle is that it shall be a *united whole*. The Theosophical Society is an ideal power for good diffused over the whole world, but it requires material conditions, and the most important of these is a material center, from which and to which the efferent and afferent forces shall circulate. This is a condition of the life of all organizations, and of all organisms, and the Theosophical Society is both; it is an organization on the material plane, an organism on the spiritual. A common center, therefore, is as necessary for spiritual as for physical reasons. “Adyar” is not a place only, it is a principle. It is a name which ought to carry with it a power far greater than that conveyed by the name “Rome”. ADYAR is the center of the Theosophical movement — not “7 Duke Street, Adelphi,” or “Post Office Box 2659, New York.

ADYAR is a principle and a symbol, as well as a locality. ADYAR is the name which means on the material plane the Headquarters of an international, or, more properly speaking, world-wide Society of persons who have common aims and objects, and are imbued with a common spirit. It means on the supra-physical plane a center of life and energy, the point to and from which the currents run between the ideal and the material. Every loyal Fellow has in his heart a little ADYAR, for he has in him a spark of the spiritual fire which the name typifies. ADYAR is the symbol of our unity as a Society, and so long as it exists in the heart of its Fellows the powers of the enemy can never prevail against the Theosophical Society.

What then, to recapitulate, must be our answer to the questions with which we started: Is such a thing as “Applied Theosophy” possible? If so, of what does it consist?

We have seen that there is no reason why the ideas and influence of the Theosophical Society should not be as great in combating wickedness in the practical department of life as in combating error in the philosophical. The Objects of the Society neither order nor forbid interference with either; but they predispose the Fellows to exert an active influence in both, by evolving in their minds a perception of truer and better things, and a desire for their realization. We have seen that it is not by making the Society itself an instrument on the physical plane that its power can be utilized for good; but that its influence must be a moral one, consisting of the combined and united thoughts and wishes of the whole Society, focused upon any individual point, and acting through the personality of its individual Fellows. We have seen that all that is necessary to make such a united power manifest is that its existence should be acknowledged and felt by the Fellows themselves; and that to acknowledge and feel it, and thus bring it from the latent to the active condition, the Fellows must perceive that the Theosophical Society is a living entity, “ideal” if one chooses to call it so, but an entity *one and indivisible* alike upon the material plane and on the supra-physical plane. We have also seen that the visible center of the Society, “ADYAR”, is symbolical of the principle of unity, as well as of the material life of the Society, and that in every sense loyalty to “ADYAR” means loyalty to the Objects of the Society and to the principles of Theosophy.

The answer to our questions then must be that Applied Theosophy is surely a possibility; and that it consists of the moral influence brought to bear upon the practical evils of life by the exertions of individual Fellows who have behind them, severally and collectively, the spiritual power created by unity of purpose, of ideas and loyalty to the truth; a power for good of which the terrestrial ADYAR is the physical center and Headquarters; while the spiritual ADYAR is the channel by means of which powerful

influences from a higher sphere, unseen but not unfelt, enter the Society through the hearts of each and all of its Fellows, thence to be outpoured upon the whole world.