

# On The Mysteries of Re-Incarnation

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*The Key to Theosophy* by H. P. Blavatsky, Section 11

## Periodical Re-Births

ENQUIRER. You mean, then, that we have all lived on earth before, in many past incarnations, and shall go on so living?

THEOSOPHIST. I do. The life-cycle, or rather the cycle of conscious life, begins with the separation of the mortal animal-man into sexes,<sup>1</sup> and will end with the close of the last generation of men, in the seventh round and seventh race of mankind. Considering we are only in the fourth round and fifth race, its duration is more easily imagined than expressed.

ENQUIRER. And we keep on incarnating in new *personalities* all the time?

THEOSOPHIST. Most assuredly so; because this life-cycle or period of incarnation may be best compared to human life. As each such life is composed of days of activity separated by nights of sleep or of inaction, so, in the incarnation-cycle, an active life is followed by a Devachanic rest.

ENQUIRER. And it is this succession of births that is generally defined as re-incarnation?

THEOSOPHIST. Just so. It is only through these births that the perpetual progress of the countless millions of Egos toward final perfection and final rest (as long as was the period of activity) can be achieved.

ENQUIRER. And what is it that regulates the duration, or special qualities of these incarnations?

THEOSOPHIST. Karma, the universal law of retributive justice.

ENQUIRER. Is it an intelligent law?

THEOSOPHIST. For the Materialist, who calls the law of periodicity<sup>2</sup> which regulates the marshalling of the several bodies, and all the other laws in nature, blind forces and mechanical laws, no doubt Karma would be a law of chance and no more. For us, no adjective or qualification could describe that which is impersonal and no entity, but a universal operative law.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Secret Doctrine* describes the separation of the sexes in the Third Race having previously been asexual.

<sup>2</sup> The law of periodicity - This second assertion of the Secret Doctrine is the absolute universality of that law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow, which physical science has observed and recorded in all departments of nature. An alternation such as that of Day and Night, Life and Death, Sleeping and Waking, is a fact so common, so perfectly universal and without exception, that it is easy to comprehend that in it we see one of the absolutely fundamental laws of the universe.

If you question me about the causative intelligence in it, I must answer you I do not know. But if you ask me to define its effects and tell you what these are in our belief, I may say that the experience of thousands of ages has shown us that they are absolute and unerring *equity*,<sup>3</sup> *wisdom*, and *intelligence*.

For Karma in its effects is an unfailing redresser<sup>4</sup> of human injustice, and of all the failures of nature; a stern adjuster of wrongs; a retributive law which rewards and punishes with equal impartiality. It is, in the strictest sense, "no respecter of persons," though, on the other hand, it can neither be propitiated,<sup>5</sup> nor turned aside by prayer. This is a belief common to Hindus and Buddhists, who both believe in Karma.

ENQUIRER. In this Christian dogmas contradict both, and I doubt whether any Christian will accept the teaching.

THEOSOPHIST. No; and Inman<sup>6</sup> gave the reason for it many years ago. As he puts it, while

"the Christians will accept any nonsense, if promulgated by the Church as a matter of faith. . . the Buddhists hold that nothing which is contradicted by sound reason can be a true doctrine of Buddha."

They do not believe in any pardon for their sins, except after an adequate and just punishment for each evil deed or thought in a future incarnation, and a proportionate compensation to the parties injured.

ENQUIRER. Where is it so stated?

THEOSOPHIST. In most of their sacred works. In the "*Wheel of the Law*" (p. 57) you may find the following Theosophical tenet: -

"Buddhists believe that every act, word or thought has its consequence, which will appear sooner or later in the present or in the future state. Evil acts will produce evil consequences, good acts will produce good consequences: prosperity in this world, or birth in heaven (Devachan) . . . in the future state."

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<sup>3</sup> Equity - The state or quality of being just and fair.

<sup>4</sup> Redress - To set right (an undesirable situation, for example); remedy or rectify. Satisfaction for wrong or injury; reparation.

<sup>5</sup> Propitiate - win or regain the favor of (a god, spirit, or person) by doing something that pleases them. "the pagans thought it was important to propitiate the gods with sacrifices" synonyms: appease, placate, mollify, pacify, make peace with, conciliate, make amends to, soothe, calm

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Inman (27 January 1820 – 3 May 1876) was a house-surgeon to the Liverpool Royal Infirmary. In his lifetime he had numerous medical papers published. He was also an amateur mythologist, and wrote *Ancient Pagan and Modern Christian Symbolism*, first published in 1869 and then again in 1875. In it he elucidated the origins of common symbols, some of them medical. Many of the symbols he discusses are in use today.

ENQUIRER. Christians believe the same thing, don't they?

THEOSOPHIST. Oh, no; they believe in the pardon and the remission of all sins. They are promised that if they only believe in the blood of Christ (an *innocent* victim!), in the blood offered by Him for the expiation<sup>7</sup> of the sins of the whole of mankind, it will atone for every mortal sin.

And we believe neither in vicarious atonement,<sup>8</sup> nor in the possibility of the remission of the smallest sin by any god, not even by a "*personal Absolute*" or "*Infinite*," if such a thing could have any existence.

What we believe in, is strict and impartial justice. Our idea of the unknown Universal Deity, represented by Karma, is that it is a Power which cannot fail, and can, therefore, have neither wrath nor mercy, only absolute Equity, which leaves every cause, great or small, to work out its inevitable effects. The saying of Jesus: "With what measure you mete<sup>9</sup> it shall be measured to you again" (Matth. vii., 2), neither by expression nor implication points to any hope of future mercy or salvation by proxy.

This is why, recognising as we do in our philosophy the justice of this statement, we cannot recommend too strongly mercy, charity, and forgiveness of mutual offences. *Resist not evil*, and *render good for evil*, are Buddhist precepts, and were first preached in view of the implacability of Karmic law.

For man to take the law into his own hands is anyhow a sacrilegious presumption. Human Law may use restrictive not punitive measures;<sup>10</sup> but a man who, believing in Karma, still revenges himself and refuses to forgive every injury, thereby rendering good for evil, is a criminal and only hurts himself.

As Karma is sure to punish the man who wronged him, by seeking to inflict an additional punishment on his enemy, he, who instead of leaving that punishment to the great Law adds to it his own mite<sup>11</sup>, only begets thereby a cause for the future reward of his own enemy and a future punishment for himself. The unfailing Regulator affects in each incarnation the quality of its successor; and the sum of the merit or demerit in preceding ones determines it.

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<sup>7</sup> Expiation - the act of making amends or reparation for guilt or wrongdoing; atonement.

<sup>8</sup> Vicarious Atonement is the teaching that the atonement which states that Christ's death was "legal." It satisfied the legal justice of God. Jesus bore the penalty of sin when He died on the cross. His death was a substitution for the believers. In other words, He substituted Himself for them upon the cross. Jesus hung in our place as He bore our sin in His body on the cross. See 1 Pet. 2:24.

(<https://carm.org/dictionary-vicarious-atonement>)

<sup>9</sup> Mete - 1. To distribute or allot. Often used with "out": mete out justice. 2. Archaic: To measure.

<sup>10</sup> Punitive - Inflicting or aiming to inflict punishment; punishing. An example of punitive is a measure taken to reprimand such as a ban, boycott or penalty. In general terms, restrictive measures are imposed to bring about a change in policy or conduct by the targeted country, part of a country, or its government, or entities or individuals with a view to promoting the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

<sup>11</sup> Mite - A very small contribution

ENQUIRER. Are we then to infer a man's past from his present?

THEOSOPHIST. Only so far as to believe that his present life is what it justly should be, to atone for the sins of the past life. Of course — seers and great adepts excepted — we cannot as average mortals know what those sins were. From our paucity of data, it is impossible for us even to determine what an old man's youth must have been; neither can we, for like reasons, draw final conclusions merely from what we see in the life of some man, as to what his past life may have been.

## What Is Karma?

ENQUIRER. But what is Karma?

THEOSOPHIST. As I have said, we consider it as the *Ultimate Law* of the Universe, the source, origin and fount of all other laws which exist throughout Nature. Karma is the unerring law which adjusts effect to cause, on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being.

As no cause remains without its due effect from greatest to least, from a cosmic disturbance down to the movement of your hand, and as like produces like, *Karma* is that unseen and unknown law *which adjusts wisely, intelligently and equitably* each effect to its cause, tracing the latter back to its producer. Though itself *unknowable*, its action is perceivable.

ENQUIRER. Then it is the "Absolute," the "Unknowable" again, and is not of much value as an explanation of the problems of life?

THEOSOPHIST. On the contrary. For, though we do not know what Karma is *per se*, and in its essence, we *do* know *how* it works, and we can define and describe its mode of action with accuracy. We only do *not* know its ultimate *Cause*, just as modern philosophy universally admits that the *ultimate* Cause of anything is "unknowable."

ENQUIRER. And what has Theosophy to say in regard to the solution of the more practical needs of humanity? What is the explanation which it offers in reference to the awful suffering and dire necessity prevalent among the so-called "lower classes?"

THEOSOPHIST. To be pointed, according to our teaching all these great social evils, the distinction of classes in Society, and of the sexes in the affairs of life, the unequal distribution of capital and of labour — all are due to what we tersely but truly denominate<sup>12</sup> KARMA.

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<sup>12</sup> Denominate - To give a name to; designate.

ENQUIRER. But, surely, all these evils which seem to fall upon the masses somewhat indiscriminately are not actual merited and INDIVIDUAL Karma?

THEOSOPHIST. No, they cannot be so strictly defined in their effects as to show that each individual environment, and the particular conditions of life in which each person finds himself, are nothing more than the retributive Karma which the individual generated in a previous life. We must not lose sight of the fact that every atom is subject to the general law governing the whole body to which it belongs, and here we come upon the wider track of the Karmic law. Do you not perceive that the aggregate of individual Karma becomes that of the nation to which those individuals belong, and further, that the sum total of National Karma is that of the World? The evils that you speak of are not peculiar to the individual or even to the Nation, they are more or less universal; and it is upon this broad line of Human interdependence that the law of Karma finds its legitimate and equable<sup>13</sup> issue.

ENQUIRER. Do I, then, understand that the law of Karma is not necessarily an individual law?

THEOSOPHIST. That is just what I mean. It is impossible that Karma could readjust the balance of power in the world's life and progress, unless it had a broad and general line of action. It is held as a truth among Theosophists that the interdependence of Humanity is the cause of what is called Distributive Karma, and it is this law which affords the solution to the great question of collective suffering and its relief.

It is an occult law, moreover, that no man can rise superior to his individual failings, without lifting, be it ever so little, the whole body of which he is an integral part.

In the same way, no one can sin, nor suffer the effects of sin, alone. In reality, there is no such thing as "Separateness"; and the nearest approach to that selfish state, which the laws of life permit, is in the intent or motive.

ENQUIRER. And are there no means by which the distributive or national Karma might be concentrated<sup>14</sup> or collected, so to speak, and brought to its natural and legitimate fulfilment without all this protracted<sup>15</sup> suffering?

THEOSOPHIST. As a general rule, and within certain limits which define the age to which we belong, the law of Karma cannot be hastened or retarded in its fulfilment. But of this I am certain, the point of possibility in either of these directions has never yet been touched. Listen to the following recital of one phase of national suffering, and then ask yourself whether, admitting the working power of individual, relative, and distributive Karma, these evils are not capable of extensive modification and general relief. What I am about to read to you is from the pen of a National Saviour, one who, having overcome Self, and being free to choose, has elected to serve Humanity, in bearing at least as much as a woman's shoulders can possibly bear of National Karma. This is what she says: —

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<sup>13</sup> Equable - adj. Unvarying; steady; Not easily disturbed; serene: an equable temper.

<sup>14</sup> Concentrated - to converge or cause to converge on a common centre; concentrate

<sup>15</sup> Protracted - To draw out or lengthen in time; prolong:

"Yes, Nature always does speak, don't you think? only sometimes we make so much noise that we drown her voice. That is why it is so restful to go out of the town and nestle awhile in the Mother's arms. I am thinking of the evening on Hampstead Heath<sup>16</sup> when we watched the sun go down; but oh! upon what suffering and misery that sun had set! A lady brought me yesterday a big hamper of wild flowers. I thought some of my East-end family had a better right to it than I, and so I took it down to a very poor school in Whitechapel<sup>17</sup> this morning. You should have seen the pallid little faces brighten! Thence I went to pay for some dinners at a little cookshop for some children. It was in a back street, narrow, full of jostling people; stench indescribable, from fish, meat, and other comestibles, all reeking in a sun that, in Whitechapel, festers instead of purifying. The cookshop was the quintessence of all the smells. Indescribable meat-pies at 1d., loathsome lumps of 'food' and swarms of flies, a very altar of Beelzebub! All about, babies on the prowl for scraps, one, with the face of an angel, gathering up cherrystones<sup>18</sup> as a light and nutritious form of diet. I came westward with every nerve shuddering and jarred, wondering whether anything can be done with some parts of London save swallowing them up in an earthquake and starting their inhabitants afresh, after a plunge into some purifying Lethe, out of which not a memory might emerge! And then I thought of Hampstead Heath, and — pondered. If by any sacrifice one could win the power to save these people, the cost would not be worth counting; but, you see, THEY must be changed — and how can that be wrought? In the condition they now are, they would not profit by any environment in which they might be placed; and yet, in their present surroundings they must continue to putrefy. It breaks my heart, this endless, hopeless misery, and the brutish degradation that is at once its outgrowth and its root. It is like the banyan tree; every branch roots itself and sends out new shoots. What a difference between these feelings and the peaceful scene at Hampstead! and yet we, who are the brothers and sisters of these poor creatures, have only a right to use Hampstead Heaths to gain strength to save Whitechapels." (*Signed by a name too respected and too well known to be given to scoffers.*)

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<sup>16</sup> Hampstead Heath (locally known as "the Heath") is a large, ancient London park, covering 320 hectares (790 acres). This grassy public space sits astride a sandy ridge, one of the highest points in London. The Heath is rambling and hilly, embracing ponds, recent and ancient woodlands.

<sup>17</sup> Whitechapel is a district in the East End of London, England. Because the area is close to the London Docklands and east of the city, it has been a popular place for immigrants and the working class. In the Victorian era the basal population of poor English country stock was swelled by immigrants from all over, particularly Irish and Jewish. Writing of the period 1883–1884, Yiddish theatre actor Jacob Adler wrote, "The further we penetrated into this Whitechapel, the more our hearts sank. Was this London? Never in Russia, never later in the worst slums of New York, were we to see such poverty as in the London of the 1880s." This endemic poverty drove many women to prostitution. Such prostitutes were numbered amongst the 11 Whitechapel murders (1888–91), some of which were committed by the legendary serial killer known as 'Jack the Ripper'.

<sup>18</sup> Cherrystone – Alternate name for the hard clam (*Mercenaria mercenaria*), also known as a quahog, round clam, or hard-shell (or hard-shelled) clam, is an edible marine bivalve mollusk.

ENQUIRER. That is a sad but beautiful letter, and I think it presents with painful conspicuity the terrible workings of what you have called "Relative and Distributive Karma." But alas! there seems no immediate hope of any relief short of an earthquake, or some such general engulfment!<sup>19</sup>

THEOSOPHIST. What right have we to think so while one-half of humanity is in a position to effect an immediate relief of the privations which are suffered by their fellows? When every individual has contributed to the general good what he can of money, of labour, and of ennobling thought, then, and only then, will the balance of National Karma be struck, and until then we have no right nor any reasons for saying that there is more life on the earth than Nature can support. It is reserved for the heroic souls, the Saviours of our Race and Nation, to find out the cause of this unequal pressure of retributive Karma, and by a supreme effort to re-adjust the balance of power, and save the people from a moral engulfment a thousand times more disastrous and more permanently evil than the like physical catastrophe, in which you seem to see the only possible outlet for this accumulated misery.

ENQUIRER. Well, then, tell me generally how you describe this law of Karma?

THEOSOPHIST. We describe Karma as that Law of re-adjustment which ever tends to restore disturbed equilibrium in the physical, and broken harmony in the moral world. We say that Karma does not act in this or that particular way always; but that it always *does* act so as to restore Harmony and preserve the balance of equilibrium, in virtue of which the Universe exists.

ENQUIRER. Give me an illustration.

THEOSOPHIST. Later on I will give you a full illustration. Think now of a pond. A stone falls into the water and creates disturbing waves. These waves oscillate backwards and forwards till at last, owing to the operation of what physicists call the law of the dissipation of energy, they are brought to rest, and the water returns to its condition of calm tranquillity. Similarly *all* action, on every plane, produces disturbance in the balanced harmony of the Universe, and the vibrations so produced will continue to roll backwards and forwards, if its area is limited, till equilibrium is restored. But since each such disturbance starts from some particular point, it is clear that equilibrium and harmony can only be restored by the reconverging *to that same point* of all the forces which were set in motion from it. And here you have proof that the consequences of a man's deeds, thoughts, etc. must all react upon *himself* with the same force with which they were set in motion.

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<sup>19</sup> engulf - 1. to swallow up in or as if in a gulf; submerge: *The stormy sea engulfed the ship.* 2. to overwhelm or envelop completely: *Grief engulfed him.*

ENQUIRER. But I see nothing of a moral character about this law. It looks to me like the simple physical law that action and reaction are equal and opposite.

THEOSOPHIST. I am not surprised to hear you say that. Europeans have got so much into the ingrained habit of considering right and wrong, good and evil, as matters of an arbitrary code of law laid down either by men, or imposed upon them by a Personal God. We Theosophists, however, say that "Good" and "Harmony," and "Evil" and "Dis-harmony," are synonymous. Further we maintain that all pain and suffering are results of want of Harmony, and that the one terrible and only cause of the disturbance of Harmony is *selfishness* in some form or another. Hence Karma gives back to every man the *actual consequences* of his own actions, without any regard to their moral character; but since he receives his due for *all*, it is obvious that he will be made to atone for all sufferings which he has caused, just as he will reap in joy and gladness the fruits of all the happiness and harmony he had helped to produce. I can do no better than quote for your benefit certain passages from books and articles written by our Theosophists — those who have a correct idea of Karma.

ENQUIRER. I wish you would, as your literature seems to be very sparing on this subject?

THEOSOPHIST. Because it is *the* most difficult of all our tenets.

Some short time ago there appeared the following objection from a Christian pen: —

"Granting that the teaching in regard to Theosophy is correct, and that 'man must be his own saviour, must overcome self and conquer the evil that is in his dual nature, to obtain the emancipation of his soul,' what is man to do after he has been awakened and converted to a certain extent from evil or wickedness? How is he to get emancipation, or pardon, or the blotting out of the evil or wickedness he has already done?"

To this Mr. J. H. Conelly replies very pertinently that no one can hope to "make the theosophical engine run on the theological track." As he has it: —

"The possibility of shirking individual responsibility is not among the concepts of Theosophy. In this faith there is no such thing as pardoning, or 'blotting out of evil or wickedness already done,' otherwise than by the adequate punishment therefor of the wrong-doer and the restoration of the harmony in the universe that had been disturbed by his wrongful act. The evil has been his own, and while others must suffer its consequences, atonement can be made by nobody but himself.

The condition contemplated. . . in which a man shall have been 'awakened and converted to a certain extent from evil or wickedness,' is that in which a man shall have realized that his deeds are evil and deserving of punishment. In that realization a sense of personal responsibility is inevitable, and just in proportion to the extent of his awakening or 'converting' must be the sense of that awful responsibility. While it is strong upon him is the time when he is urged to accept the doctrine of vicarious atonement.



He is told that he must also repent, but nothing is easier than that. It is an amiable weakness of human nature that we are quite prone to regret the evil we have done when our attention is called, and we have either suffered from it ourselves or enjoyed its fruits. Possibly, close analysis of the feeling would show us that that which we regret is rather the necessity that seemed to require the evil as a means of attainment of our selfish ends than the evil itself.

Attractive as this prospect of casting our burden of sins 'at the foot of the cross' may be to the ordinary mind, it does not commend itself to the Theosophic student. He does not apprehend why the sinner by attaining knowledge of his evil can thereby merit any pardon for or the blotting out of his past wickedness; or why repentance and future right living entitle him to a suspension in his favour of the universal law of relation between cause and effect. The results of his evil deeds continue to exist; the suffering caused to others by his wickedness is not blotted out. The Theosophical student takes the result of wickedness upon the innocent into his problem. He considers not only the guilty person, but his victims.

Evil is an infraction of the laws of harmony governing the universe, and the penalty thereof must fall upon the violator of that law himself. Christ uttered the warning, 'Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon thee,' and St. Paul said, 'Work out your own salvation. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' That, by the way, is a fine metaphoric rendering of the sentence of the Puranas far antedating him — that 'every man reaps the consequences of his own acts.'

This is the principle of the law of Karma which is taught by Theosophy. Sinnett, in his 'Esoteric Buddhism,' rendered Karma as 'the law of ethical causation.' 'The law of retribution,' as Mdme. Blavatsky translates its meaning, is better. It is the power which

'Just though mysterious, leads us on unerring  
Through ways unmarked from guilt to punishment.'

But it is more. It rewards merit as unerringly and amply as it punishes demerit. It is the outcome of every act, of thought, word and deed, and by it men mould themselves, their lives and happenings. Eastern philosophy rejects the idea of a newly created soul for every baby born. It believes in a limited number of monads, evolving and growing more and more perfect through their assimilation of many successive personalities. Those personalities are the product of Karma and it is by Karma and re-incarnation that the human monad in time returns to its source — absolute deity."

E. D. Walker, in his "Re-incarnation," offers the following explanation: —

"Briefly, the doctrine of Karma is that we have made ourselves what we are by former actions, and are building our future eternity by present actions. There is no destiny but what we ourselves determine. There is no salvation or condemnation except what we ourselves bring about. . . . Because it offers no shelter for culpable actions and necessitates a sterling manliness, it is less welcome to weak natures than the easy religious tenets of vicarious atonement, intercession, forgiveness and death-bed conversions. . . . In the domain of eternal justice the offence and the punishment are inseparably connected as the same event, because there is no real distinction between the action and its outcome. . . . It is Karma, or our old acts, that draws us back into earthly life. The spirit's abode changes according to its Karma, and this Karma forbids any long continuance in one condition, because *it* is always changing. So long as action is governed by material and selfish motives, just so long must the effect of that action be manifested in physical re-births. Only the perfectly selfless man can elude the gravitation of material life. Few have attained this, but it is the goal of mankind."

And then the writer quotes from the *Secret Doctrine*:

"Those who believe in Karma have to believe in *destiny*, which, from birth to death, every man is weaving, thread by thread, around himself, as a spider does his cobweb, and this destiny is guided either by the heavenly voice of the invisible *prototype* outside of us, or by our more intimate *astral* or inner man, who is but too often the evil genius of the embodied entity called man. Both these lead on the outward man, but one of them must prevail; and from the very beginning of the invisible affray<sup>20</sup> the stern and implacable *law of compensation* steps in and takes its course, faithfully following the fluctuations. When the last strand is woven, and man is seemingly enwrapped in the network of his own doing, then he finds himself completely under the empire of this *self-made* destiny. . . . An Occultist or a philosopher will not speak of the goodness or cruelty of Providence; but, identifying it with Karma-Nemesis<sup>21</sup>, he will teach that, nevertheless, it guards the good and watches over them in this as in future lives; and that it punishes the evil-doer — aye, even to his seventh re-birth — so long, in short, as the effect of his having thrown into perturbation even the smallest atom in the infinite world of harmony has not been finally re-adjusted. For the only decree of Karma — an eternal and immutable decree — is absolute harmony in the world of matter as it is in the world of spirit.

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<sup>20</sup> affray - a noisy quarrel or brawl.

<sup>21</sup> The following quote implies that Nemesis is the Greek term for Karma. "In the West, since Pagan Wisdom has been repudiated as having grown from and been developed by the dark powers supposed to be at constant war and in opposition to the little tribal Jehovah — the full and awful significance of the Greek Nemesis (or Karma) has been entirely forgotten." (SD1, 642)

It is not, therefore, Karma that rewards or punishes, but it is we who reward or punish ourselves according to whether we work with, through and along with nature, abiding by the laws on which that harmony depends, or — break them.

Nor would the ways of Karma be inscrutable<sup>22</sup> were men to work in union and harmony, instead of disunion and strife. For our ignorance of those ways — which one portion of mankind calls the ways of Providence, dark and intricate; while another sees in them the action of blind fatalism; and a third simple chance, with neither gods nor devils to guide them — would surely disappear if we would but attribute all these to their correct cause. . . . We stand bewildered before the mystery of our own making and the riddles of life that *we will not* solve, and then accuse the great Sphinx of devouring us. But verily there is not an accident of our lives, not a misshapen day, or a misfortune, that could not be traced back to our own doings in this or in another life. . . . The law of Karma is inextricably interwoven with that of reincarnation. . . . It is only this doctrine that can explain to us the mysterious problem of good and evil, and reconcile man to the terrible and *apparent* injustice of life. Nothing but such certainty can quiet our revolted sense of justice. For, when one unacquainted with the noble doctrine looks around him and observes the inequalities of birth and fortune, of intellect and capacities; when one sees honour paid to fools and profligates, on whom fortune has heaped her favours by mere privilege of birth, and their nearest neighbour, with all his intellect and noble virtues — far more deserving in every way — perishing for want and for lack of sympathy — when one sees all this and has to turn away, helpless to relieve the undeserved suffering, one's ears ringing and heart aching with the cries of pain around him — that blessed knowledge of Karma alone prevents him from cursing life and men as well as their supposed Creator. . . . This law, whether conscious or unconscious, predestines nothing and no one. It exists from and in Eternity truly, for it is ETERNITY itself; and as such, since no act can be coequal with eternity, it cannot be said to act, for it is ACTION itself. It is not the wave which drowns the man, but the *personal* action of the wretch who goes deliberately and places himself under the *impersonal* action of the laws that govern the ocean's motion. Karma creates nothing, nor does it design. It is man who plants and creates causes, and Karmic law adjusts the effects, which adjustment is not an act but universal harmony, tending ever to resume its original position, like a bough, which, bent down too forcibly, rebounds with corresponding vigour. If it happen[s] to dislocate the arm that tried to bend it out of its natural position, shall we say it is the bough which broke our arm or that our own folly has brought us to grief? Karma has never sought to destroy intellectual and individual liberty, like the god invented by the Monotheists. It has not involved its decrees in darkness purposely to perplex man, nor shall it punish him who dares to scrutinize its mysteries.

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<sup>22</sup> inscrutable - adj. Difficult to understand or interpret; impenetrable:

On the contrary, he who unveils through study and meditation its intricate paths, and throws light on those dark ways, in the windings of which so many men perish owing to their ignorance of the labyrinth of life, is working for the good of his fellow-men. Karma is an absolute and eternal law in the world of manifestation; and as there can only be one Absolute, as one Eternal, ever-present Cause, believers in Karma cannot be regarded as atheists or materialists, still less as fatalists, for Karma is one with the Unknowable, of which it is an aspect, in its effects in the phenomenal world."

Another able Theosophic writer says (*Purpose of Theosophy*, by Mrs. P. Sinnett): —

"Every individual is making Karma either good or bad in each action and thought of his daily round, and is at the same time working out in this life the Karma brought about by the acts and desires of the last. When we see people afflicted by congenital<sup>23</sup> ailments it may be safely assumed that these ailments are the inevitable results of causes started by themselves in a previous birth.

It may be argued that, as these afflictions are hereditary, they can have nothing to do with a past incarnation; but it must be remembered that the Ego, the real man, the individuality, has no spiritual origin in the parentage by which it is re-embodied, but it is drawn by the affinities which its previous mode of life attracted round it into the current that carries it, when the time comes for re-birth, to the home best fitted for the development of those tendencies. . . . This doctrine of Karma, when properly understood, is well calculated to guide and assist those who realize its truth to a higher and better mode of life, for it must not be forgotten that not only our actions but our thoughts also are most assuredly followed by a crowd of circumstances that will influence for good or for evil our own future, and, what is still more important, the future of many of our fellow-creatures.

If sins of omission and commission could in any case be only self-regarding, the fact on the sinner's Karma would be a matter of minor consequence. The effect that every thought and act through life carries with it for good or evil a corresponding influence on other members of the human family renders a strict sense of justice, morality, and unselfishness so necessary to future happiness or progress. A crime once committed, an evil thought sent out from the mind, are past recall — no amount of repentance can wipe out their results in the future. Repentance, if sincere, will deter a man from repeating errors; it cannot save him or others from the effects of those already produced, which will most unerringly overtake him either in this life or in the next re-birth."

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<sup>23</sup> Congenital - condition that is present at birth, as a result of either heredity or environmental influences: a congenital heart defect; congenital syphilis.

Mr. J. H. Conelly proceeds —

"The believers in a religion based upon such doctrine are willing it should be compared with one in which man's destiny for eternity is determined by the accidents of a single, brief earthly existence, during which he is cheered by the promise that 'as the tree falls so shall it lie'; in which his brightest hope, when he wakes up to a knowledge of his wickedness, is the doctrine of vicarious atonement, and in which even that is handicapped, according to the Presbyterian Confession of Faith.

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men thus predestinated and foreordained are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished. . . . As God hath appointed the elect unto glory. . . . Neither are any other redeemed by Christ effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin to the praise of his glorious justice."

This is what the able defender says. Nor can we do any better than wind up the subject as he does, by a quotation from a magnificent poem. As he says: —

"The exquisite beauty of Edwin Arnold's exposition of Karma in *'The Light of Asia'* tempts to its reproduction here, but it is too long for quotation in full. Here is a portion of it:

Karma — all that total of a soul  
Which is the things it did, the thoughts it had,  
The 'self' it wove with woof<sup>24</sup> of viewless time  
Crossed on the warp<sup>25</sup> invisible of acts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before beginning and without an end,  
As space eternal and as surety sure,  
Is fixed a Power divine which moves to good,  
Only its laws endure.

It will not be contemned<sup>26</sup> of anyone;  
Who thwarts it loses, and who serves it gains;  
The hidden good it pays with peace and bliss,  
The hidden ill with pains.

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<sup>24</sup> woof - The threads that run crosswise in a woven fabric, at right angles to the warp threads; weft.

<sup>25</sup> warp - The threads that run lengthwise in a woven fabric, crossed at right angles to the woof.

<sup>26</sup> contemn - to treat or regard with contempt; scorn; despise

It seeth everywhere and marketh all;  
Do right — it recompenseth! Do one wrong —  
The equal retribution must be made,  
Though Dharma tarry<sup>27</sup> long.

It knows not wrath nor pardon; utter-true,  
Its measures mete, its faultless balance weighs;  
Times are as naught, to-morrow it will judge  
Or after many days.

\* \* \* \* \*

Such is the law which moves to righteousness,  
Which none at last can turn aside or stay;  
The heart of it is love, the end of it  
Is peace and consummation sweet. Obey."

And now I advise you to compare our Theosophic views upon Karma, the law of Retribution, and say whether they are not both more philosophical and just than this cruel and idiotic dogma which makes of "God" a senseless fiend; the tenet, namely, that the "elect only" will be saved, and the rest doomed to eternal perdition!

ENQUIRER. Yes, I see what you mean generally; but I wish you could give some concrete example of the action of Karma?

THEOSOPHIST. That I cannot do. We can only feel sure, as I said before, that our present lives and circumstances are the direct results of our own deeds and thoughts in lives that are past. But we, who are not Seers or Initiates, cannot know anything about the details of the working of the law of Karma.

ENQUIRER. Can anyone, even an Adept or Seer, follow out this Karmic process of re-adjustment in detail?

THEOSOPHIST. Certainly: "Those who *know*" can do so by the exercise of powers which are latent even in all men.

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<sup>27</sup> Tarry - To delay or be late in going, coming, or doing something: "O let us be married! Too long we have tarried!" (Edward Lear).

## Who Are Those Who Know?

ENQUIRER. Does this hold equally of ourselves as of others?

THEOSOPHIST. Equally. As just said, the same limited vision exists for all, save those who have reached in the present incarnation the acme of spiritual vision and clairvoyance. We can only perceive that, if things with us ought to have been different, they would have been different; that we are what we have made ourselves, and have only what we have earned for ourselves.

ENQUIRER. I am afraid such a conception would only embitter us.

THEOSOPHIST. I believe it is precisely the reverse. It is disbelief in the just law of retribution that is more likely to awaken every combative feeling in man. A child, as much as a man, resents a punishment, or even a reproof<sup>28</sup> he believes to be unmerited, far more than he does a severer punishment, if he feels that it is merited. Belief in Karma is the highest reason for reconciliation to one's lot in this life, and the very strongest incentive towards effort to better the succeeding re-birth. Both of these, indeed, would be destroyed if we supposed that our lot was the result of anything but strict *Law*, or that destiny was in any other hands than our own.

ENQUIRER. You have just asserted that this system of Re-incarnation under Karmic law commended itself to reason, justice, and the moral sense. But, if so, is it not at some sacrifice of the gentler qualities of sympathy and pity, and thus a hardening of the finer instincts of human nature?

THEOSOPHIST. Only apparently, not really. No man can receive more or less than his deserts without a corresponding injustice or partiality to others; and a law which could be averted through compassion would bring about more misery than it saved, more irritation and curses than thanks. Remember also, that we do not administer the law, if we do create causes for its effects; it administers itself; and again, that the most copious provision for the manifestation of provision for the manifestation of *just* compassion and mercy is shown in the state of Devachan.

ENQUIRER. You speak of Adepts as being an exception to the rule of our general ignorance. Do they really know more than we do of Re-incarnation and after states?

THEOSOPHIST. They do, indeed. By the training of faculties we all possess, but which they alone have developed to perfection, they have entered in spirit these various planes and states we have been discussing. For long ages, one generation of Adepts after another has studied the mysteries of being, of life, death, and re-birth, and all have taught in their turn some of the facts so learned.

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<sup>28</sup> Reproof - The act, an instance, or an expression of reproving or criticizing; a rebuke - to criticize (someone) sharply; reprimand.

ENQUIRER. And is the production of Adepts the aim of Theosophy?

THEOSOPHIST. Theosophy considers humanity as an emanation from divinity on its return path thereto. At an advanced point upon the path, Adeptship is reached by those who have devoted several incarnations to its achievement. For, remember well, no man has ever reached Adeptship in the Secret Sciences in one life; but many incarnations are necessary for it after the formation of a conscious purpose and the beginning of the needful training. Many may be the men and women in the very midst of our Society who have begun this uphill work toward illumination several incarnations ago, and who yet, owing to the personal illusions of the present life, are either ignorant of the fact, or on the road to losing every chance in this existence of progressing any farther. They feel an irresistible attraction toward occultism and the *Higher Life*, and yet are too personal and self-opinionated, too much in love with the deceptive allurements of mundane life and the world's ephemeral pleasures, to give them up; and so lose their chance in their present birth. But, for ordinary men, for the practical duties of daily life, such a far-off result is inappropriate as an aim and quite ineffective as a motive.

ENQUIRER. What, then, may be their object or distinct purpose in joining the Theosophical Society?

THEOSOPHIST. Many are interested in our doctrines and feel instinctively that they are truer than those of any dogmatic religion. Others have formed a fixed resolve to attain the highest ideal of man's duty.

#### The Difference Between Faith and Knowledge; Or, Blind and Reasoned Faith

ENQUIRER. You say that they accept and believe in the doctrines of Theosophy. But, as they do not belong to those Adepts you have just mentioned, then they must accept your teachings on *blind faith*. In what does this differ from that of conventional religions?

THEOSOPHIST. As it differs on almost all the other points, so it differs on this one. What you call "faith," and that which is *blind faith*, in reality, and with regard to the dogmas of the Christian religions, becomes with us "*knowledge*," the logical sequence of things *we know*, about *facts* in nature. Your Doctrines are based upon interpretation, therefore, upon the *second-hand* testimony of Seers; ours upon the invariable and unvarying testimony of Seers. The ordinary Christian theology, for instance, holds that man is a creature of God, of three component parts — body, soul, and spirit — all essential to his integrity, and all, either in the gross form of physical earthly existence or in the etherealized form of post-resurrection experience, needed to so constitute him for ever, each man having thus a permanent existence separate from other men, and from the Divine. Theosophy, on the other hand, holds that man, being an emanation from the Unknown, yet ever present and infinite Divine Essence, his body and everything else is impermanent, hence an illusion; Spirit alone in him being the one enduring substance, and even that losing its separated individuality at the moment of its complete re-union with the *Universal Spirit*.



ENQUIRER. If we lose even our individuality, then it becomes simply annihilation.

THEOSOPHIST. I say it *does not*, since I speak of *separate*, not of universal individuality. The latter becomes as a part transformed into the whole; the *dewdrop* is not evaporated, but becomes the sea. Is physical man *annihilated*, when from a foetus he becomes an old man? What kind of Satanic pride must be ours if we place our infinitesimally small consciousness and individuality higher than the universal and infinite consciousness!

ENQUIRER. It follows, then, that there is, *de facto*, no man, but all is Spirit?

THEOSOPHIST. You are mistaken. It thus follows that the union of Spirit with matter is but temporary; or, to put it more clearly, since Spirit and matter are one, being the two opposite poles of the *universal* manifested substance — that Spirit loses its right to the name so long as the smallest particle and atom of its manifesting substance still clings to any form, the result of differentiation. To believe otherwise is *blind faith*.

ENQUIRER. Thus it is on *knowledge*, not on *faith*, that you assert that the permanent principle, the Spirit, simply makes a transit through matter?

THEOSOPHIST. I would put it otherwise and say — we assert that the appearance of the permanent and *one* principle, Spirit, *as matter* is transient, and, therefore, no better than an illusion.

ENQUIRER. Very well; and this, given out on knowledge not faith?

THEOSOPHIST. Just so. But as I see very well what you are driving at, I may just as well tell you that we hold *faith*, such as you advocate, to be a mental disease, and real faith, *i.e.*, the *pistis*<sup>29</sup> of the Greeks, as “*belief based on knowledge*,” whether supplied by the evidence of physical or *spiritual* senses.

ENQUIRER. What do you mean?

THEOSOPHIST. I mean, if it is the difference between the two that you want to know, then I can tell you that between *faith on authority* and *faith on one's spiritual intuition*, there is a very great difference.

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<sup>29</sup> In Greek mythology, Pistis (Πίστις) was the personification of good faith, trust and reliability. That which gives assurance

ENQUIRER. What is it?

THEOSOPHIST. One is human credulity<sup>30</sup> and *superstition*,<sup>31</sup> the other human belief and *intuition*. As Professor Alexander Wilder says in his introduction to the *Eleusinian Mysteries*,<sup>32</sup>

It is ignorance which leads to profanation. Men ridicule what they do not properly understand. . . The undercurrent of this world is set towards one goal; and inside of human credulity. . . is a power almost infinite, a holy faith capable of apprehending the supremest truths of all existence.<sup>33</sup>

Those who limit that “credulity” to human authoritative dogmas alone, will never fathom that power nor even perceive it in their natures. It is stuck fast to the external plane and is unable to bring forth into play the essence that rules it; for to do this they have to claim their right of private judgment, and this they never *dare* to do.

ENQUIRER. And is it that “intuition” which forces you to reject God as a personal Father, Ruler and Governor of the Universe?

THEOSOPHIST. Precisely. We believe in an ever unknowable Principle, because blind aberration alone can make one maintain that the Universe, thinking man, and all the marvels contained even in the world of matter, could have grown without some *intelligent powers* to bring about the extraordinarily wise arrangement of all its parts. Nature may err, and often does, in its details and the external manifestations of its materials, never in its inner causes and results. Ancient pagans held on this question far more philosophical views than modern philosophers, whether Agnostics, Materialists or Christians; and no pagan writer has ever yet advanced the proposition that cruelty and mercy are not finite feelings, and can therefore be made the attributes of an *infinite* god. Their gods, therefore, were all finite. The Siamese author of the *Wheel of the Law*, expresses the same idea about your personal god as we do; he says (p. 25) —

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<sup>30</sup> Credulity - A disposition to believe too readily.

<sup>31</sup> Annie Besant writes that: “superstition [is] taking the unessential for the essential”. C.W. Leadbeater writes that: “So long as we are only reading things parrot-wise those things are superstitions. The very belief in the truth may be a superstition, if it has no better basis for us than that it is written here or there” and that “There is a possibility, it seems to me, of a Theosophical superstition.”

<sup>32</sup> The most famous of the ancient religious Mysteries were the Eleusinian, whose rites were celebrated every five years in the city of Eleusis to honor Ceres (Demeter, Rhea, or Isis) and her daughter, Persephone. The initiates of the Eleusinian School were famous throughout Greece for the beauty of their philosophic concepts and the high standards of morality which they demonstrated in their daily lives. (*The Secret Teachings of All Ages* by Manly P. Hall)

<sup>33</sup> *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*. A dissertation. by Thomas Taylor, edited, with introduction, notes, emendations, and glossary, by Alexander Wilder, M. D.

"A Buddhist might believe in the existence of a god, sublime above all human qualities and attributes — a perfect god, above love, and hatred, and jealousy, calmly resting in a quietude that nothing could disturb, and of such a god he would speak no disparagement, not from a desire to please him or fear to offend him, but from natural veneration; but he cannot understand a god with the attributes and qualities of men, a god who loves and hates, and shows anger; a Deity who, whether described as by Christian Missionaries or by Mahometans or Brahmins,<sup>34</sup> or Jews, falls below his standard of even an ordinary good man."

ENQUIRER. Faith for faith, is not the faith of the Christian who believes, in his human helplessness and humility, that there is a merciful Father in Heaven who will protect him from temptation, help him in life, and forgive him his transgressions, better than the cold and proud, almost fatalistic faith of the Buddhists, Vedantins, and Theosophists?

THEOSOPHIST. Persist in calling our belief "faith" if you will. But once we are again on this ever-recurring question, I ask in my turn: faith for faith, is not the one based on strict logic and reason better than the one which is based simply on human authority or — hero-worship? *Our* "faith" has all the logical force of the arithmetical truism that 2 and 2 will produce 4. Your faith is like the logic of some emotional women, of whom Tourgenyeff said that for them 2 and 2 were generally 5<sup>35</sup>, and a tallow candle<sup>36</sup> into the bargain. Yours is a faith, moreover, which clashes not only with every conceivable view of justice and logic, but which, if analysed, leads man to his moral perdition, checks the progress of mankind, and positively making of might, right — transforms every second man into a Cain to his brother Abel.

ENQUIRER. What do you allude to?

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34 HPB: Sectarian Brahmins are here meant. The Parabrahm of the Vedantins is the Deity we accept and believe in.

35  $2+2=5$ : Ivan Turgenev wrote in *Prayer*, one of his Poems in Prose "Whatever a man prays for, he prays for a miracle. Every prayer reduces itself to this: Great God, grant that twice two be not four."

36 Tallow - Hard fat obtained from parts of the bodies of cattle, sheep, or horses, and used in foodstuffs or to make candles, leather dressing, soap, and lubricants.

## Has God the Right to Forgive?

THEOSOPHIST. To the Doctrine of Atonement; I allude to that dangerous dogma in which you believe, and which teaches us that no matter how enormous our crimes against the laws of God and of man, we have but to believe in the self-sacrifice of Jesus for the salvation of mankind, and his blood will wash out every stain. It is twenty years that I preach against it, and I may now draw your attention to a paragraph from *Isis Unveiled*, written in 1875. This is what Christianity teaches, and what we combat: —

"God's mercy is boundless and unfathomable. It is impossible to conceive of a human sin so damnable that the price paid in advance for the redemption of the sinner would not wipe it out if a thousandfold worse. And furthermore, it is never too late to repent. Though the offender wait until the last minute of the last hour of the last day of his mortal life, before his blanched lips utter the confession of faith, he may go to Paradise; the dying thief did it, and so may all others as vile. These are the assumptions of the Church, and of the Clergy; assumptions banged at the heads of your countrymen by England's favourite preachers, right in the 'light of the XIXth century,'" this most paradoxical age of all. Now to what does it lead?"

ENQUIRER. Does it not make the Christian happier than the Buddhist or Brahmin?

THEOSOPHIST. No; not the educated man, at any rate, since the majority of these have long since virtually lost all belief in this cruel dogma. But it leads those who still believe in it more *easily to the threshold of every conceivable crime*, than any other I know of. Let me quote to you from *Isis* once more (*vide* Vol. II. pp. 542 and 543) —

"If we step outside the little circle of creed and consider the universe as a whole balanced by the exquisite adjustment of parts, how all sound logic, how the faintest glimmering sense of justice, revolts against this Vicarious Atonement! If the criminal sinned only against himself, and wronged no one but himself; if by sincere repentance he could cause the obliteration of past events, not only from the memory of man, but also from that imperishable record, which no deity — not even the Supreme of the Supreme — can cause to disappear, then this dogma might not be incomprehensible. But to maintain that one may wrong his fellow-man, kill, disturb the equilibrium of society and the natural order of things, and then — through cowardice, hope, or compulsion, it matters not — be forgiven by believing that the spilling of one blood washes out the other blood spilt — this is preposterous! Can the *results* of a crime be obliterated even though the crime itself should be pardoned? The effects of a cause are never limited to the boundaries of the cause, nor can the results of crime be confined to the offender and his victim. Every good as well as evil action has its effects, as palpably as the stone flung into calm water. The simile is trite, but it is the best ever conceived, so let us use it. The eddying circles are greater and swifter as the disturbing object is greater or smaller, but the smallest pebble, nay, the tiniest speck, makes its ripples. And this disturbance is not alone visible and on the surface. Below, unseen, in every direction — outward and downward — drop pushes drop until the sides and bottom are touched by the force.

More, the air above the water is agitated, and this disturbance passes, as the physicists tell us, from stratum to stratum out into space forever and ever; an impulse has been given to matter, and that is never lost, can never be recalled! . . .

"So with crime, and so with its opposite. The action may be instantaneous, the effects are eternal. When, after the stone is once flung into the pond, we can recall it to the hand, roll back the ripples, obliterate the force expended, restore the etheric waves to their previous state of non-being, and wipe out every trace of the act of throwing the missile, so that Time's record shall not show that it ever happened, then, *then* we may patiently hear Christians argue for the efficacy of this Atonement,"

and — cease to believe in Karmic Law. As it now stands, we call upon the whole world to decide, which of our two doctrines is the most appreciative of deific justice, and which is more reasonable, even on simple human evidence and logic.

ENQUIRER. Yet millions believe in the Christian dogma and are happy.

THEOSOPHIST. Pure sentimentalism overpowering their thinking faculties, which no true philanthropist or Altruist will ever accept. It is not even a dream of selfishness, but a nightmare of the human intellect. Look where it leads to, and tell me the name of that pagan country where crimes are more easily committed or more numerous than in Christian lands. Look at the long and ghastly annual records of crimes committed in European countries; and behold Protestant and Biblical America. There, *conversions* effected in prisons are more numerous than those made by public *revivals* and preaching. See how the ledger-balance of Christian justice (!) stands: Red-handed murderers, urged on by the demons of lust, revenge, cupidity, fanaticism, or mere brutal thirst for blood, who kill their victims, in most cases, without giving them time to repent or call on Jesus. These, perhaps, died sinful, and, of course — consistently with theological logic — met the reward of their greater or lesser offences. But the murderer, overtaken by human justice, is imprisoned, wept over by sentimentalists, prayed with and at, pronounces the charmed words of conversion, and goes to the scaffold a redeemed child of Jesus! Except for the murder, he would not have been prayed with, redeemed, pardoned. Clearly this man did well to murder, for thus he gained eternal happiness! And how about the victim, and his, or her family, relatives, dependents, social relations; has justice no recompense for them? Must they suffer in this world and the next, while he who wronged them sits beside the "holy thief" of Calvary, and is for ever blessed? On this question the clergy keep a prudent silence. (*Isis Unveiled.*) And now you know why Theosophists — whose fundamental belief and hope is justice for all, in Heaven as on earth, and in Karma — reject this dogma.

ENQUIRER. The ultimate destiny of man, then, is not a Heaven presided over by God, but the gradual transformation of matter into its primordial element, Spirit?

THEOSOPHIST. It is to that final goal to which all tends in nature.

ENQUIRER. Do not some of you regard this association or "fall of spirit into matter" as evil, and re-birth as a sorrow?

THEOSOPHIST. Some do, and therefore strive to shorten their period of probation on earth. It is not an unmixed evil, however, since it ensures the experience upon which we mount to knowledge and wisdom. I mean that experience which *teaches* that the needs of our spiritual nature can never be met by other than spiritual happiness. As long as we are in the body, we are subjected to pain, suffering and all the disappointing incidents occurring during life. Therefore, and to palliate this, we finally acquire knowledge which alone can afford us relief and hope of a better future.

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