

The World We Live In

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[Page 12] "THE World we live in" seems a rather large order for discussion in one evening. We are so accustomed to think that we really do live in a vast world, a mighty world; or rising to the sublime height of utter verbal nonsense we say that we live in an *infinite* world, and having reduced infinity to the position of a quality of the finite we may well feel that there is no more to be said in that direction.

Then if we are morally inclined we sigh and think what a very wicked world we live in, and we wish to do something to make it a better world, and perhaps we turn social moralists and set to work in earnest to study other people's vices and faults, and then we denounce them and feel more moral than before, but still the wicked world continues wicked, and we feel very, very sad that it should be so. We are really very quaint when we are so moral.

Now when we are young and the life is hot and strong in us and hope is the guide of our imagination, and knowledge is small and experience an empty word: then the world is a beautiful world, a happy world, a world of love and life, and we feel that to live is to love, and to love is to be blessed, Then the animal in us (ever natural and sane) tries to lead us into the open path of simple happiness and pure love of life, and the mind is caught in the current of animal life and plunges into the stream, throwing the bright light of imagination over the simple joy of sensation and gilding with its magic power the pure form of pleasure; leads the soul "singing in its chrysalis of flesh" down the flowery paths of sense to the desert land that is bordered by the dark river of the unknown. Then a shadow falls upon the garden of flowers and the soul looks for the joy that led it on, and finds the dark melancholy figure of satiety which will never leave it now until that river is crossed. Then a struggle begins and the soul seeks to regain the gardens of sense that now are almost out of reach, but everywhere the same shadow falls, and the soul finding the fruit bitter to the taste curses the world it lives in and would die. Then the world is "hollow", an "illusion", a "snare", and so forth, and so on, and we are the "victims of cruel Fate" and many more strong phrases expressive of disappointment. Then man is indeed cast out of the Garden of Eden, and he knows that he is naked, the first step from the animal to the human stage has been taken, and there is no return until he can "regain the child state he has lost". At first the song of hope echoes faintly in his heart, and he seeks, and the [Page 13] world is a land of exile, and he is a pilgrim as he wanders in the waste land that borders the dark river. But soon the song dies out in his heart and the mists of the waste places cloud his vision and he forgets the land of his birth, and the hope of his life, and the very purpose of his existence, and he would sleep and be at rest. But, though he does not recognise it, hope sings on and her voice awakens the dark messenger of Fate whom I called satiety, and who now appears to him as despair and drives him with a whip whose thongs are bitter thoughts, so that he knows no rest, and travels on simply to try and escape from thought. The world he lives in now is hell. Desire lives in him, and no means of satisfaction can he find, and every other dweller in hell also in the same manner,

desires and craves he knows not what; then the idea develops in these sufferers that some one of their number holds that for which he is seeking, and not knowing what they seek, they fight and take from one another that which they seem to possess, and fight with others to protect what they have gained, never stopping to enquire if the possession of these hard won things brings rest or happiness to themselves. And this world is the world of "civilisation" and "business", and in this hell there is to be found momentary oblivion and temporary reprieve from the pitiless scourge of thought. But a deeper hell may yet be reached, where the nature of these possessions is seen and where the voice of hope cannot reach, and only the constant scourging of the lash of bitter thought is felt and all the land is a barren waste. Here cynicism reigns supreme. There is nothing to strive for, all the fruits of the earth are filled with ashes, and we pour out the bitterness of our hearts in curses of the things we have striven and fought for, friendship, fame, virtue, liberty; all are gone.

At this stage of progress or degradation, of wisdom or imbecility, (whichever you please to call it) we call ourselves men and women of the world, we boast that we have no illusions, and infer that consequently we have nothing more to learn. This I think is pretty near the lowest hell, as it is a stage at which we must either pass on to fall into the "ladle of the button moulder" to be melted up again like the defective buttons, as described by Ibsen in his "Peer Gynt", and recommence the pilgrimage, or we must make a plunge in another direction and seek a new world. This would be impossible if hope were ever really dead. But I believe that hope is the internal recognition of some permanent truth, and this is at the root of all our dissatisfaction with things that are impermanent. Despair I take to be the dark side of that unknown of which hope is the light side. Perhaps we might call that unknown the Divine Wisdom which can balance the opposites and see the truth of hope and the truth of despair.

It is indeed remarkable that just as we cannot distinguish between the [Page 14] sudden sensations of extreme heat and extreme cold, so hope and despair seem to drive mankind alike along a certain path. And then one begins to think that the hand that guides is ever the same, but now the path is smooth and now rough, and when we enjoy we say a friend is at hand, and when we suffer we say, "an enemy hath done this".

So we begin to see that the "World we live in" is really a name for our own mind, in which we do live, so long as we believe ourselves to be separate persons living in a world which is something separate from ourselves.

To say that the world we live in is a mere creation of our own fancy is to state a partial truth in an incomplete fashion, and to make an assertion which is contradicted by daily experience, for we find that others act upon and influence us and affect our conditions of life to an enormous extent.

So long as we look upon ourselves as separate from the people and things around us, so long must we admit that the world we live in is not *merely* the product of our own imagination; unless we are willing to go a step further and say that we too are *mere* fictions of our own imagination. If we do this, we have only given the same qualification to the whole world and start again where we were before; because, if *all* is *illusion*, then the converse must be equally true that *nothing* is *reality*. Now we may maintain that the one reality is nothing — but I doubt if these words convey more music to the mind than the rattle of dried peas in an empty can. So I would banish or at least discreetly pigeon-hole such cant phrases as all is vanity, all is illusion, there is nothing real but the true. These are more fit for silent meditation, as symbols for the

concentration of our mind upon abstract subjects, than for practical use in daily life, unless indeed the practical purpose be to acquire a cheap reputation for inferior wisdom or cheap sanctity, a useful quality no doubt in promoting companies, or founding fraudulent benefit societies, and so on, but too vague and contradictory to be useful guides in life.

Thus we may say all is illusion, possession of property is but the fancied possession of what really does not exist. I, who know this, am therefore freed from the rules that guide others, and so can deal with these illusions without affecting the one reality; and if convenient, I can convert my neighbour's illusion into an instrument of my will, and in fact, take his property without hurting the absolute truth or the one reality, and though this is not a carefully thought-out case, it is easy to see that a very abstract statement of principles can be made to serve almost any purpose, unless supplemented by some further philosophy than is contained in these cant phrases.

Cant phrases are the tombs of dead ideas, and only serve as landmarks to show where passed a grand mind — and wherever one finds a number of [Page 15] tombstones together, one will also expect to find decaying corpses or dry bones not far off. And it is so with cant phrases and creeds. The spook of the departed idea may linger, but the spirit has passed on, and must be sought in the green fields and forests, and across mountain and moor, where life is free, and love unbound, and the sun shines.

We are all more or less agreed on one point, which is, that there is something not quite right with the world we live in, even though when things are at their best and brightest we may go so far as to say that we have nothing to grumble at; still, we seldom put our happiest moments in the present, the golden age is either in the past or in the future, while for a great part of the world, as far as I can see, life is little more than just bearable, occasionally not even that. Now why is this so ?

The famous struggle for existence is not alone to blame. For if we look at those animals which live by preying upon one another, they do not seem to be unhappy when they are not actually being killed by their enemies. While men and women, who have never known what it is to want a day's food or clothing, are so miserable that they hate themselves and all around them.

I fancy that if the struggle for existence were the absolute rule of life in the human kingdom, the life of men would be much happier, much stronger, and much freer than it is now, more elemental and less human: for the rule of life would be known to all, and there would be no dishonesty possible; there would be no pity, because there would be no recognition of any claim to consideration, and so the simple, elemental state would be reached; there would be no right and wrong, simply desire and the power to gratify it. This would be the state described by Regin, the dwarf, in the old Saga.

"Fair was the earth whilesome,
Ere the short-lived thralls of the Gods amidst its dales were come: —
And how were we worse than the Gods, though maybe we lived not as long ?
Yet no weight of memory maimed us; nor aught we knew of wrong.
What felt our souls of shaming, what knew our hearts of love ?
We did and undid at pleasure, and repented naught thereof."

And perhaps this description is a true tradition of an earlier race before the gods made the men folk the short-lived thralls of the gods. It seems to correspond to the middle of what we call the Atlantean period when the giants of Lemuria were past, and the all-powerful Atlantean race was breaking up and the new spirit was working in the world to produce this fifth race, just as the changing which will prepare the way for the sixth race is now showing itself. The gods are said to fashion the grief and the gold. And Reidman, the dwarf king, when he has snared the three gods, taunts them, and asks Hoenir: —

"Come, Hoenir, fashion now
My heart for love and for hope, that the fear in my body may grow,
That I may grieve and be sorry, that the ruth may arise in me,
As thou dealtst with the first of men-folk, when a master-smith thou wouldst be." [Page 16]

This story of the gods is very fine. The three gods who are principally concerned with the making of man as we know him, seem to express the three great forces acting in man; there is the Allfather Odin, the Supreme Lord, or inmost Self of Man, and there is the God of Hope and Love,

"Hoenir, the utter blameless, who wrought the Hope of Man."

And then the dark Spirit of Evil, a necessary and ever present power in his evolution.

"Loki, the world's begrudger, who maketh all labour vain."

Thus showing the trinity of Hope the creator, Hate the destroyer, and the Supreme the preserver.

But when the gods came down and busied themselves with the earth and breathed their spirit into the men-forms that till then had lived free from hope and knowing no regret, — then the sorrow began, and love and pity, remorse and fear followed, and the creatures that walked the earth were neither gods nor the dwarfs of old, but a vacillating, weak race, mingling virtue and vice, and tangling the right and the wrong, some straining to reach the gods and some trying to do the deeds of the dwarfs, and then treachery and hypocrisy and respectability came into fashion; and now the noble lives of the god-like ones serve as models on which to mould the mask of the fraud and the canting hypocrite, and the world is so stained with deceit that we can hardly think of our own best friends without suspecting them of falsity in their highest efforts, and the weak lose faith in any goodness or hope of progress at all. This is the state of transition, the turning point as it is often called, and the place of trial, and so on. The next stage may be an approach to the god stage, when again the simple law of life will be clear to all, and as Signy says to Sigurd:—

'There, as thou drawest thy sword, thou shall look on the days that were,
And the foul shall still seem foul, and the fair shall still seem fair;
But thy wit shall then be awakened, and thou shalt know indeed,
Why the brave man's spear is broken and his war shield fails at need,
Why the loving is unbeloved, and the just man falls from his state,
Why the liar gains in a day what the soothfast strives for late.
Yea, and thy deeds shalt thou know, and great shall thy gladness be,

Like a picture all of gold thy life days thou shalt see;
And know that thou too wert a God to abide through the hurry and haste;
A God in the golden hall, a God on the rain-swept waste,
A God in the battle triumphant, a God on the heap of the slain,
And thy hope shall arise and blossom, and thy love be quickened again.
By the side of the sons of Odin thou shalt fashion a tale to be told,
In the halls of the happy Baldur, nor there shall the tale grow old,
Of the days before the changing e'en those that over us pass".

[Morris's "Sigurd the Volsung."][Page 17]

This seems to describe a future state of development, and if possible for one, then necessarily in time for all, unless there be failures in the efforts of humanities as well as of individuals.

But is this state really future in the sense of being not yet existent ? I think not. I believe that we necessarily call *present* that state which holds our consciousness, and that other states of development are only past or future to us, in proportion as they are perceived by us. I believe that the primeval savage or neolithic man dear to modern speculators, is with us today, and that the mighty god-like heroes are not far off, but in our very midst, and it depends on our own development whether, living still upon this earth, we are in the neolithic, the savage, the civilized, or the man-god state. I believe these states are all present in each one of us, and that we live in all these worlds.

Sometimes when in one state, say the civilised state, a person becomes conscious of the neolithic state, and if he keeps the two states clear, he says he has had a vision, and if not others say he is mad, and he is placed in confinement, as it tends to inconvenience to mix up these periods or states.

Are we alive when we sleep and dream ? and in what world are we then living ? For if one considers the sleep state, it seems that it must be either life or death, that is either conscious or unconscious. Of course we usually talk about being unconscious when the body fails to record any mental activity, and assume that there is no mental activity if none is recorded by the physical apparatus; but this is a pure assumption, and the experience of persons who indulge in prophetic dreams and who are acquainted with the states of trance, is opposed to this view. It seems to me far more reasonable to suppose that there is never any break in consciousness; for to me man is a centre of consciousness, and I cannot understand consciousness which is not conscious. But I can easily see that only a certain range of experiences can be recorded or expressed by the physical apparatus, and that other experiences can only be recorded by other instruments more or less subtle, and perhaps while the physical instrument rests in sleep or in trance, the conscious entity is employing itself in activity in its other instruments or bodies, and being in that state perhaps forgetful of this waking, state, lives its life as strongly and as really as it does when returning to the physical body and taking up that form of expression which is possible on the physical plane.

So the world we live in is indeed a large order, as I said at first, and yet strangely enough it is very small, so small, indeed, that I hardly like to think of it after indulging in thoughts of the possibilities within us of indefinitely extended life and activity. But even if we accept this earth of ours as a serious affair, and the pretty maps that are made for us by [Page 18] persons of fancy and imagination, assisted by travellers' stories and some measurements, as really representing something in nature, how absurdly little do we

each one know of it, a few views of bits of places and things liberally filled in by imagination, and all a matter of fancy or memory, for without fancy and memory we are limited to what is actually before our eyes. We perhaps hardly realize how entirely we live in anticipation and recollection, for before we have seen an object, that is, before the mind has recorded one impression, another is on the screen ready for inspection, and the appearance of reality which we take as an attribute of this world, is a theory which we gradually build up by repeating similar experiences until we accept them as real.

What is the world in which we live ? For the most part it is a sphere with one inhabitant, the self. If you think of it you will see that the world is always a sphere of dimensions with self in the centre. The thinker sends out his perception across the unseen and unknown, and when he meets the object of perception, it is always to him pictured on the wall of his thought sphere. This is the picture gallery of his world. Now it is a very curious fact that if we try to think of the next room, and then of some place we are acquainted with at a great distance, there is no difference in the time taken to reach the picture in either case, and when seen the picture is always on the wall or limit of our thought sphere.

We all know that in the matter of vision with the physical eye the picture is thrown on the retina of the eye, and then examined by the thinker who reads this very small and flat picture as a three dimensional arrangement with a certain scale of measurement, based on results gained by experiments made in childhood by the aid of sight and touch. Let us remember this, that if the ordinary theory of sight be correct we do not see distance or size, but all pictures are the same size and distance, which is simply the size of the retina and the distance of the thinker from the retina, all else is guess based upon experiment and reason.

The same thing appears to happen in thought, and we thus live inside a sphere which we people with our thoughts. For when an impression reaches us through any of our perceptive faculties we place it on the screen of our mind and look at it, and then decide that it represents this or that state of the unknown outside, and as it is placed on the boundary wall of our consciousness we cannot get beyond it, and so are come to take these pictures for realities, and live in our little world of images, constantly occupying ourselves with looking over our stock and rearranging and sorting the pictures so as to make believe we are busy.

Gradually, however, it dawns upon us that this is a very hollow world, and we begin to yearn for the outside, and then we find that so long as we look upon these mind pictures as realities, we cannot get outside our little [Page 19] world, for we shut ourselves in with these walls of our own making. Then how to get out of our cramped condition ? If we cannot go out, then let us try to go within and observe our own mind, and control its wanderings. Then we find that the mind is indeed the creator of its own illusions, and realising thus that things are at any rate not only what they seem, we see that they may be altogether different, and our world may extend indefinitely with added or altered powers of observation and perception. Then, if we take the Theosophic teachings as to the world being all life, and every particle composed of lives, each one a model, more or less imperfectly developed, of the whole, we may find our world infinitely more interesting, and own position in it more satisfactory: for being ourselves life and having bodies made up of lives reflecting the original basic idea in every particle, we see how intimately we are related to all around us, whether human or mineral, spiritual or material. Thus our possibilities of knowledge become as wide as the universe, for by knowledge of the model we may see the plan of the whole. And by learning the laws of our own being we may learn the laws of the world we live in; we no longer feel really isolated when we know that our bodies are but the forms through which

pass continuous streams of life, interpenetrating all other bodies; and our minds in like manner are hotels in which beings, which we call thoughts, take a momentary lodging and pass to other minds, better or worse for the treatment we may have given them. Then we begin to see that we are not obliged to accept as a lodger every dirty and disreputable ruffian of a thought that chooses to claim admittance, and we see the possibility of becoming masters of our own minds.

But you will say, what does all this lead us to, what is the practical application of it all ? Yes, let us be practical, I like to be practical.

Well, in the first place, if the nature of the world we live in is determined by the condition of our own mind, and we are not satisfied with its state, then by all means let us change it. But be practical, don't go meddling with other people's morals, because perhaps they too are creations of your own fancy, but go to work and alter the mind in which all your world is pictured. Now, by this I do not mean that you are to take your body and isolate it from other bodies, and worry it with tricks and experiments; just guide it along and take care of it until you can make a better, and don't blame your body for the vices of your mind; the act of the body is only the dead thought cast out of the mind; the mind is the creator, and must be trained, and a troublesome business it is, very ! It would be so much pleasanter to reform the world by killing all the people that get in our way; but unfortunately we have tried that and failed, because we are not strong enough to destroy all opposition and to live alone. So we have to fall back on the painful and distressing method of controlling our [Page 20] own minds. And then as we are practical we look for a good method, this entails forming some working theories of life and of our own nature, and of our relations to the world around us.

In this task we are helped by the teachers who have founded philosophies, religions, and ethical systems, and they all agree in recommending altruism, which is decidedly unattractive for personal use. Again, one thinks how much better it would be if we were to teach altruism to others, that really does make one feel better. But to practise it, no it is not reasonable to bother about other people when you want to improve yourself. And yet if one does make an experiment in that direction, it is odd how different one feels.

Then it is necessary to learn why this very trying path should be adopted, and then we study and find teachings as to the real unity of all things, and that people and things are all masks which cover the same consciousness which looks out of these windows at its own appearances. And then one sees that altruism or brotherhood is only an effort to realise a fact in nature and the biggest step that can be taken towards enlarging our own conscious existence or ignoring the world we live in. It is a simple thing, and therefore enormously difficult for us in our present state, which, as I have tried to suggest, is not a simple one. And therefore we all fail to act in an altruistic or brotherly fashion. Those who begin to practise it really soon pass out of the ordinary state in which most of us live, and we look after them and long to follow, and fail in the most ridiculous fashion. We are in this difficulty, that we set before us as the first step that which is the ultimate goal, I imagine, and therefore our failure should not distress us, for the effort, if real, is all the success we can hope for now and all we need trouble about. Our efforts are the seeds we sow, and the sower is not yet the reaper. This symbol of the sower is familiar to us in many forms, and one of the finest versions is in the Norse epic of "Sigurd", or rather in Brynhild's Book of Wisdom it runs thus :—

"Be wise ! 'tis a marvel of words and a mock for the fool and the blind.
Be wise ! and cherish thine hope in the freshness of the days
And scatter its seed abroad in the field of the people's praise;
Then fair shall it fall in the furrow and some the earth shall speed,
And the sons of men shall marvel at the blossom of the deed.
And some the earth shall speed not, nay rather the winds of Heaven
Shall waft it away from thy longing, then a gift to the gods thou hast given.
And a tree for the roof and the wall in the house of the hope that shall be,
Though it seem our very sorrow and the grief of me and thee".

[William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung]