

END OF LIFE ISSUES

PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

From Puck to Prospero

from H.P.B.'s *The Key to Theosophy*

ENQUIRER. I was told that the Theosophical Society was originally founded to crush Spiritualism and belief in the survival of the individuality in man?

THEOSOPHIST. You are misinformed. Our beliefs are all founded on that immortal individuality. But then, like so many others, you confuse *personality* with individuality. Your Western psychologists do not seem to have established any clear distinction between the two. Yet it is precisely that difference which gives the key-note to the understanding of Eastern philosophy, and which lies at the root of the divergence between the Theosophical and Spiritualistic teachings. And though it may draw upon us still more the hostility of some Spiritualists, yet I must state here that it is Theosophy which is the *true* and unalloyed Spiritualism, while the modern scheme of that name is, as now practised by the masses, simply transcendental materialism.

ENQUIRER. Please explain your idea more clearly.

THEOSOPHIST. What I mean is that though our teachings insist upon the identity of spirit and matter, and though we say that spirit is *potential* matter, and matter simply crystallized spirit (*e.g.*, as ice is solidified steam), yet since the original and eternal condition of *all* is not spirit but *meta*-spirit, so to speak, (visible and solid matter being simply its periodical manifestation,) we maintain that the term spirit can only be applied to the *true* individuality.

ENQUIRER. But what is the distinction between this "true individuality" and the "I" or "Ego" of which we are all conscious?

THEOSOPHIST. Before I can answer you, we must argue upon what you mean by "I" or "Ego." We distinguish between the simple fact of self-consciousness, the simple feeling that "I am I," and the complex thought that "I am Mr. Smith" or "Mrs. Brown." Believing as we do in a series of births for the same Ego, or re-incarnation, this distinction is the fundamental pivot of the whole idea. You see "Mr. Smith" really means a long series of daily experiences strung together by the thread of memory, and forming what Mr. Smith calls "himself." But none of these "experiences" are really the "I" or the Ego, nor do they give "Mr. Smith" the feeling that he is himself, for he forgets the greater part of his daily experiences, and they produce the feeling of *Egoity* in him only while they last. We Theosophists, therefore, distinguish between this bundle of "experiences," which we call the *false* (because so finite and evanescent) *personality*, and that element in man to which the feeling of "I am I" is due. It is this "I am I" which we call the *true* individuality; and we say that this "Ego" or individuality plays, like an actor, many parts on the stage of life.* Let us call every new life on earth of the same *Ego* a *night* on the stage of a theatre.

One night the actor, or "Ego," appears as "Macbeth," the next as "Shylock," the third as "Romeo," the fourth as "Hamlet" or "King Lear," and so on, until he has run through the whole cycle of incarnations. The Ego begins his life-pilgrimage as a sprite, an "Ariel," or a "Puck"; he plays the part of a *super*, is a soldier, a servant, one of the chorus; rises then to "speaking parts," plays leading *roles*, interspersed with insignificant parts, till he finally retires from the stage as "Prospero," the *magician*.