

Psychic and Noetic Action

“Psychic & Noetic Action” was written about 1889 or 1890. It is the title of the last writing of Madame H.P. Blavatsky in the nineteenth century. Throughout her life, she wrote voluminously. Her two major works (comprehensive, double-volume books) are entitled *Isis Unveiled* and the *Secret Doctrine*, the latter containing “all that can be given out to the modern age.” In addition, Blavatsky wrote several thousand articles, journals, magazines, and pamphlets, all of which can now be found on the inter-net. Some of her articles were included within other people’s publications, and there were those that she herself published. Toward the end of her life she wrote a devotional book entitled *The Voice of the Silence*, in which she stated that she was translating in order to pass along selections from ancient teachings given to her while she was studying with her Teacher in Tibet. *The Voice of the Silence* was “Dedicated to the few.” Towards the end of her life she wrote a book, *The Key to Theosophy*; which was intended to be relatively accessible introduction to Theosophy, written in a question and answer format by topic. Some of the topics discussed include karma, reincarnation, the nature of man and the universe. The most highly regarded biography of this remarkable woman is *H.P.B.: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*, by Sylvia Cranston.

“Psychic and Noetic Action,” is approximately fourteen pages, and is most relevant to what is going on today regarding the various studies of consciousness, how the mind works, how memory operates, and especially as currently being studied and related to quantum physics. Contained within this article Madame Blavatsky teaches ideas that continue to lie beyond the most contemporary lines of scientific and psychological theories. She indicated that until science acknowledges the reality of the astral plane, “its wings will remain clipped.” “Psychic & Noetic Action” distinguishes between two modes of action: *psychic* versus *noetic*. In her use of the word action she refers primarily to activity on the mental plane, of whatever nature.

Psychic action is, broadly speaking, mental activity pertaining to the lower personal self originating in the personalized mind that concerns itself with one's personal worldly life. The typical daily functioning mind, the personal life, its ups, its downs, cares and the like. That is psychic action: the mind is engaged in such action sees itself

Psychic and Noetic Action

as being separate from others, other minds, and other people. It is a *separative* consciousness. In the most ancient traditions around the world, the only, so-called, sin lay in this sense of separativeness.

Noetic action pertains to the higher mind, the higher self, the contents of which are timeless, universal, and impersonal. In some traditions it is referred to as the higher mind as distinguished from the lower personal mind. Thus, what we call the mind can be directed upward towards the impersonal or downward into the world of persons and egotisms. Further, we all possess the ability to use the mind impersonally, alas, we are seldom taught of this possibility. Indeed, one of the most profound Renaissance statements of this fact can be found in *The Oration on the Dignity of Man* by Pico della Mirandola, itself restating teaching found in the philosophies of Pythagoras and Plato. We have all had our noetic moments, in which we have suddenly sensed something larger, something deeper, or something broader. We may or may not be able to put it into words but we are sensing something that is beyond the ordinary. Such moments, possibly fleeting and quick, if properly pondered poetic and noetic can alter one's perspective upon one's self and upon one's daily life. It is a brief contact with our higher self, the Higher Self of All.

The derivation of noetic comes from two Greek words *nous* and *psyche*. *Nous* has variously been translated as mind, as soul, or as the source of thought. However translated, it does not refer to the personal mind (our word "personality" is derived from the Greek word *personae* meaning mask). One of the first astronauts who saw from space the earth as a whole, floating in space, shortly after landing dropped out of NASA and founded the "Institute of Noetic Sciences," in which the study centers upon understanding and experiencing noetic consciousness. *Psyche* refers to the personal mind and its ever-changing emotional states.

Blavatsky teaches that every single human being possess the potential of beginning to attempt to move towards, to activate the higher mind, a higher self. She sometimes refers to it as Universal Consciousness, or as the Universal Mind. All of us have an access to this by virtue of being human beings. In this lies our true dignity. To

Psychic and Noetic Action

be a human being is to have potential access to cosmic consciousness (universal mind, nous). This aspect of ourselves precedes our birth and succeeds our death: it is immortal. The ability to consciously realize our immortality is the reason many ancient sages taught of the need to be grateful for the attainment of a human form, the only form in which such realization can be sought. In our essential nature, then, we are the immortals. Nous is not something to be given or to be taken away. The realization of our noetic nature lies only in and through our own efforts. Nous itself, beyond the planes ruled by cyclic law remains unaffected by all that we do. Nous has been called the eternal witness, the witness of the lives we live. Our so-called good and bad deeds, our activities in the daily round affect it not. Being centered in our psychic nature, our deeds are subject to the law of karma, the laws of cause and effect that can, in their turn, move us towards or away from realization of nous. Blavatsky's *Voice of the Silence* refers to nous as "that state in which all shadows are unknown, where Light shines with everlasting glory."

Blavatsky asks: What is consciousness? What is memory? How does memory work? She indicates three possible sources for answers to these questions. After brief discussion of the deficiencies of explanations offered by the religions and sciences her day, she moves to a discussion based upon the wisdom of Sages with whom she had studied and whose teachings she was giving out.

Blavatsky presciently shows the deficiencies of scientific and philosophical materialism, anticipating the scientific discoveries of which were made within years of her passing. Materialism is no longer seen to be a viable view of reality — the notion that our world is built of irreducible building blocks. None have yet been discovered. Quite the contrary, the further we investigate what we call reality the more insubstantial it becomes. This current view coincides directly with Blavatsky's predictions and teachings. In this regard Blavatsky quotes from her Teacher's Teacher: "Between degrading materialism and superstitious religions, the white dove of truth has nowhere upon which to rest his weary feet." Thus, we can see that, from her standpoint, both scientific materialism and superstitious anthropomorphic religions stand in the way of mankind's realization of the true nature of reality and itself.

Psychic and Noetic Action

In seeking to explain the ancient views, she uses the word addicted in reference to our use of the lower psychic mind. We cling to the world as revealed to us through our five senses. We are, as the Bible says, “of the Earth.” Moreover, the personal mind can, at best, aspire to terrestrial wisdom which while, perhaps impressive, is fleeting and will not last any longer than Ozymandias in Shelley’s poem of that name. Most of us are not aware of the noetic element in ourselves, functionally. When speaking of us acting primarily psychically, she is not using the word psychic in any sort of clichéd sense, let alone to indicate any sort of so-called psychic phenomena; rather she uses the term to refer to personal consciousness.

Most of us are living primarily within personal consciousness, centered around: a name, a form, a past, and a future linked indissolubly through identification with the physical body. Our psychic nature receives most of its impulses from the body and its sensations, external or internal. Blavatsky states that an entire life lived predominantly within the persona will, in a certain sense, be a fruitless life because the persona does not outlast the death of the body. On the other hand, nous, to the extent invoked, can affect the persona and its life in a manner consistent with survival after death. The ability of nous to act upon the body through the psyche can only be developed through the ongoing attempts to render the psyche more porous, more open to the intimations of nous. Thus, most ancient teachings stress the importance of purifying the psychic mind, of directing its gaze upward towards nous and inculcating within the psyche a moral framework upon which to base one’s activities in the world.

Early in the article, Blavatsky uses the term Occultism. This concept has been (for a number of reasons) systematically misunderstood, especially in the West. In the times, for example, of Pythagoras and Plato, it was referred to as The Mysteries that were taught in the ancient mystery schools. The word occult literally means hidden. Thus, the occultism to which Blavatsky refers is the study of “the hidden forces in nature and in man.” It is said to be a mathematically precise science consisting of higher and lower aspects. Plato referred to these as the greater and the lesser mysteries. Occultism also has to do with learning to control these hidden forces, which, she says should not be

Psychic and Noetic Action

attempted unless under the tutelage of a true Teacher. The aim is to gradually gain control over the forces of which we are usually at the mercy. This aim is a very preliminary aspect of the study. She also emphasizes the extreme importance of undertaking such study from an altruistic motive. To do otherwise can result in great harm to one's self and to others.

“Occultism regards every atom as an independent entity.” What she refers to in her use of the word atom goes far beyond what we typically think when atom comes to mind. We think of the atom as that which is contained in the nucleus of the cell. However, Occultism regards these cells as conscious units, a view formed in the twentieth century, in quantum physics, psychophysiology, and some forms of spiritual teachings. Blavatsky elaborates in saying that our personal thoughts and feelings impress themselves upon our cells, creating in them our personal memories. Such cellular memories are said to govern most of our responses to the world, those that we think of as our choices.

Furthermore, in assigning the personal memory to the cellular level, Blavatsky is denying that memory has a particular location in the body or in the brain. This too has become known since her time. She teaches that memory is contained within every cell in every organ of the human body. While not delving deeper into this most occult teaching, she does mention the liver and the spleen as organs pertaining to certain types of terrestrial everyday activities as being memories stored in the liver and the spleen. Ergo, when we remember something, the actual organ where that memory is stored is transmuted electro-magnetically, thereby releasing this memory into the mind. In other words, memory is not a matter of the brain. When we have a memory there is a corresponding brain activity, yet the memory itself is not stored in the brain. It should be added that the liver and spleen are mentioned as examples only, that memory is spread throughout the body.

Everything we experience is composed of elements — themselves composed of elements — and so on, until one reaches the void. The most miniscule of elements are said to be moving at the speed of light. Since the world we experience appears to be

Psychic and Noetic Action

solid, not moving at the speed of light and occupying specific spaces, what must be studied turns out to be our consciousness. A twentieth century quantum physicist remarked, “The only thing left for physics to study is the thing that is studying physics.” Thus, as all the sages have taught, the world is not what it appears to be. It has no inherent reality, although within it there exists time, space, and causation. All of this apparent world and its alleged reality is the product of being centered in the psychic mind. A Hindu sage once said, “We see what we want to see. Remove the want, you will see what is.” From the standpoint of the noetic mind, what is seen is reducible to numbers, colors, and sounds. So one investigating what can be known as the ancient mystery schools discovers that their preliminary training consisted in studying and slowly mastering numbers, colors, and sounds. From the standpoint of nous, one perceives colors, numbers and sounds. A movement in this direction was indicated by a teacher who advised a pupil, “See ideas, not persons, forces, not forms.” Indeed, the numbers we experience are not rows of numbers or formulas containing numbers. Rather, it could be likened to harmonics, one of the earliest subjects taught in the school of Pythagoras. Harmonics can be reduced to fractions. Strike a chord and you can identify the fraction you hear. It is numbers. It is, of course, also sound — and to some people color. Sound is literally vibration. Those vibrations can be measured in a scientific manner. Blavatsky teaches elsewhere, “that on the very highest metaphysical plane, the original manifestation is sound,” hence, for example, “In the beginning was the Word.”

Everything is in vibratory motion. The internal and external is constantly interacting on the psyche and its world. Impressions come from within and from without, even when sleeping. Unless one takes measures to alter them, certain impressions will return to one on a cyclical basis. In order to begin to appreciate slower rates of motion, let alone motionlessness, a discipline must have begun to learn how to concentrate the lower mind. One approach is to center the mind upon an unchanging ideal or upon one of mankind’s Great Teachers. Such attempts now only help one to develop concentration, but, at the same time, expose one to the precincts of noetic thought. Through such activity we come to see, much more clearly than before, the dignity that lies in the human

Psychic and Noetic Action

power of choice. We come to see that we can gravitate upwards towards the noetic, the ideal, or downward into the shadowy world of endless flux. This is not an either or, rather it is a matter of degree. The more upward gravitation, the greater will be the positive benefits one can bring back into the world of suffering humanity, the more light and hope one will have to offer.

Blavatsky also teaches that because most of our thinking of a psychic, personal nature, we are trapped in a kind of whirling turba — the only escape from which may begin with a moment of clarity or a deeply felt desire to improve one's condition for the sake of all. On the other hand, noetic consciousness, (a person is in a high state of meditation or in a state of ecstasy; even thinking a noble thought, that is not personal), is capable of affecting the atoms that make up the cells. As mentioned earlier, noetic thinking affects the atomic structure of things and correlates with the atomic structure of not only one's body, but also of one's environment. Therefore, we can be affecting things cellularly, so to speak, or we could be affecting them atomically. The elaborate nature of such effects are not dealt with in this article but only implied. A Sage, a wise Being, could give a lecture, and be affecting the atomic structures of the people present as well as people who are not present. The words of such a being can change human lives, karma permitting. On the other hand, someone not adept could give the exact same lecture, saying the exact words to the same group of listeners but not operating noetically — would affect them only upon the cellular level, at best. Regarding the latter example, people might walk away with a new idea or two but there would be no significant changes in their lives then or in the future. This is one reason why Buddha stressed the importance of what he called “right companionship.” If one is attempting to awaken the noetic aspects of one's self, it is most helpful to spend time with others attempting the same. This was one of the reasons for the establishment of monasteries in various spiritual traditions. Raghavan Iyer said, “ In America there is a rule that is almost never broken, and that is that in a collection of people, the lowest common denominator is always going to be controlling the situation,” *i.e.*, the psychic nature will prevail.

Psychic and Noetic Action

Basically the human enterprise seen from the standpoint of this article is the systematic attempt to pay less attention to one's psychic impressions and to give more attention to what we understand to be the higher noetic mind. In our attempts to move in this direction, we will soon discover there to be many elements within our psychic nature, our personality, which quite strongly resist our attempts to gaze upwards. This is easily ascertained by merely sitting down in a quiet place determined to hold one's mind on an impersonal, universal idea. It is for this reason that the Path is sometimes referred to as "the battle ground within the mind." No true Teacher has ever taught that the Path is easy to tread. William Quan Judge, H.P. Blavatsky's closest pupil, put this in terms of "filling up channels cut into the mind while simultaneously, with continuity, creating new and more noetic channels."

To consider this from a different standpoint, Blavatsky refers to the "Great Serpent." This refers to what she calls the astral light, within which all psychic impressions exist. The astral light is both universal and particular. For example if a family has lived in a house for some time, that house will have a certain feel to it, to those open to such impressions. These impressions have been imprinted upon the lower astral (or cellular) matter composing the house. This can be expanded to include larger collective atmospheres, including the prevailing atmosphere of the earth itself. This is the primary reason for the teaching of such matters — all of our thoughts and feelings are affecting the whole, whether we be aware of it or not. The impediments to noetic consciousness mentioned above constitute the primary vibratory levels of the planet that one must penetrate, through courage and continuity.

The Great Serpent, referred to, for example, in the beginning of Genesis, is not literally a serpent but refers, when read more esoterically, to the astral light discussed above. To continue with the same example, the "fall" represents mankind's addiction to the psychic mind and its world. Note: These ideas are discussed in great detail in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*. From a very general and exoteric standpoint, the world's great suffering and negativity can be seen as expressions of the Great Serpent. In some traditions that which is needful is symbolized by the putting of one's foot upon the

Psychic and Noetic Action

head of a serpent. In the symbolism of Shiva's Dance one of his feet is resting upon a small mouse, symbolizing the same aspects of existence, as does the Great Serpent.

The Great Serpent's energy (the mouse in this case) when subdued, *i.e.*, when no longer possessing independence of action, can be used by the seeker to more easily gain access to noetic consciousness. This may be one interpretation of Jesus' teaching that "The Kingdom of Heaven must be taken by storm."

Freeing one's self of dominance by the Great Serpent is a matter of degree, often, according to Blavatsky, requiring efforts over lifetimes. During her time with her Teacher in Tibet, Blavatsky was taught how to overcome and subdue The Great Serpent that she said, "Is no easy task." She wrote of people's varying sensitivities to the different sub-planes of the lower astral light. Those who are more sensitive to these planes encounter greater difficulties upon their Path. Thus, greater sensitivity is a "double edged sword."

Blavatsky states that an experience, however brief, of noetic consciousness is due to previously cultivated abilities or, more commonly, to having undergone a process of training (under a Teacher) resulting in the gradual ability to "paralyze the lower self at will," which, seen from the physical standpoint consists of moving from the cellular to the atomic aspects of the body. One who has achieved this ability to be "en rapport" with the noetic at will is referred to as an Adept.

Yet another type of access to the Higher Self can occur when a person is extremely ill or in an extremely grave situation. They might suddenly find themselves in a noetic state of consciousness — though they may not have a name for it. Yet, in such cases, the experience, however brief, is life changing.

Additionally, Blavatsky writes that any form of medium-ship, of involvement with séances, of what more recently has been called "channeling" is extremely dangerous in that it involves invoking and attracting malevolent elements out of the lower astral light. This danger is not only to the people present but is also dangerous to the collective consciousness. Sensitive souls may find themselves influenced negatively by such invoked influences. She gives a few examples that include murder, drunkenness and

Psychic and Noetic Action

immorality. These all originate with extreme passivity to lower, psychic influences. The brilliant psychotherapist, Carl Jung, wrote to Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, that alcohol had not been referred to in the past as “spirits” for no reason. Jung had studied Blavatsky and others regarding the astral light and its “spirits.”

Returning to the cellular and the atom levels of functioning, we can find at the former extreme very dark and negative impressions, vibrations, and at the latter extreme, in the case of Self-Realized beings, an atmosphere of calm, love, and compassion. Given these extremes and the ability of any human being to chose to move towards the latter, Blavatsky wrote “Psychic and Noetic Action” which she considered to be, perhaps, her most important. It was to be her last article of hundreds.

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