

Olcott and Blavatsky: Theosophical Twins

An Essay in Archetypes

John Algeo

We used to speak of ourselves as the Theosophical Twins. [ODL 1.9:141]1

Henry Steel Olcott's reference to Helena Blavatsky and himself as "Theosophical Twins" has depths that are not immediately apparent. On the surface, it seems to be just a statement that they were alike with respect to Theosophy. However, the expression evokes an archetypal reference as well. These remarks are an essay, or attempt, to explore that evocation by considering four things: first, the nature of archetypes; second, the extent and meaning of the archetype of the Twins; third, how that archetype applies to Olcott and Blavatsky; and finally, how it applies as well to all of us.

1. Archetypes

Like much else in Western thought, the concept of archetypes goes back to Plato. Plato posited the existence of ideal forms, of which all the objects of this world are but poor copies or reflections. Plato's archetypal ideal forms are absolutely real and unchanging. Their reflections in our world are only relatively real and impermanent. Presumably, there is an archetypal tree, of which all oaks, pines, palms, elms, and so on are only partial and imperfect reflections. However different those particular trees may seem from one another, they all share the quality of "treeness." Those particular varieties of trees are all types of the archetype of the Tree.

Plato's theory of archetypes relates to, and may have developed from, his concern with analyzing language to discover Truth. If we talk about trees—and if we group oaks, pines, palms, elms, etc. within that category—"treeness" must exist apart from particular trees. Otherwise our talk has no basis in reality and philosophy (in so far as it consists of analyzing language for truth) is vacuous.

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung updated and internalized the archetypes. Jung maintained that they are contents of our collective unconscious mind, developed over the evolutionary ages through the experiences of our ancestors. He believed them to be the common property of our species and, as contents of the unconscious, not to be directly accessible to the conscious mind. Instead, Jung thought that the unconscious archetypes are powerful energies that manifest in the conscious mind through dreams, visions, symbols, and so on.

Archetypal manifestations vary in their nature from one culture to another, but in every culture they are recognizably related to their common unconscious source. Thus, there is a Great Mother archetype that manifests as Isis in Egypt, Kwan Yin in China, the Venus of Willendorf in stone-age Austria, the multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus, the Virgin Mother Mary in Christianity, Sophia in Gnosticism, Kali in Hinduism, and so on. Different cultural manifestations focus on different aspects of the common unconscious archetype, so may appear superficially quite different; but they all share some central, core quality; in the case of the example just cited, that quality is "motherliness."

Jung developed his theory of archetypes to explain how some of his patients could dream or doodle complex symbolical images that are essentially the same as those in ancient alchemical manuscripts, which they could not possibly have known. He posited an aspect of the human mind of which we are not directly conscious, but which we inherit from our ancestors, just as we inherit the physical features of our bodies.

Plato's archetypes and Jung's archetypes are clearly related concepts, but they are also clearly different concepts. What, however, is a Theosophical understanding of the concept of archetypes? It is a basic Theosophical teaching that every outer shape is modelled on an inner form. What things are is not imposed on them from outside, but develops from their inner natures.

In addressing the question of how species come to be different from one another (a question raised and answered by Charles Darwin), H. P. Blavatsky refers to "the occult fact of the differentiation of species from

the primal astral root-types" (SD 2:737). The term astral used here does not have its later, more specific meaning of "emotional," but rather means "inner" or "subtle." These astral (or inner) root-types are the archetypes. Blavatsky goes on to elaborate:

Whatever . . . "natural selection," etc., etc., may effect, the fundamental unity of structural plan remains practically unaffected by all subsequent modifications. The "Unity of Type" common, in a sense, to all the animal and human kingdoms, is . . . but a witness to the essential unity of the "ground-plan" Nature has followed in fashioning her creatures.

What Blavatsky is saying here is not unlike what present-day geneticists are saying. Although Darwinian natural selection explains how species come to be different, all species of all living creatures are built according to the same "fundamental unity of structural plan." Today scientists have identified that "structural plan" as DNA, which is the molecular basis of all heredity. It is nature's "ground-plan," according to which the physical forms of all creatures are fashioned.

A related Theosophical understanding is set forth in the following passage:

Thus every mortal has his immortal counterpart, or rather his Archetype, in heaven. This means that the former [the mortal] is indissolubly united to the latter [the immortal], in each of his incarnations, and for the duration of the cycle of births; only it is by the spiritual and intellectual Principle in him, entirely distinct from the lower self, never through the earthly personality. [CW 14:51]

Here Blavatsky is talking about what are usually called our personality and our individuality. And she refers to our individuality as our "Archetype"; it is the immortal "spiritual and intellectual Principle" in us, which is manifested or reflected in our mortal "earthly personality." Just as nature has an archetypal "ground-plan" according to which all living things are fashioned, so we individually have an archetype, our immortal "spiritual and intellectual Principle," which is reflected in and expresses itself through our mortal "earthly personality," or rather our series of successive earthly personalities.

This concept of our individuality as our archetype is expressed also in the wonderful creation myth of the Anthropogenesis volume of The Secret Doctrine. Stanza 17 of that series from the Book of Dzyan recounts the making of the human constitution by a committee (with typical committee indecision and ineffectiveness). The committee enthusiastically begins its work. The Lunar Fathers give us our form, on which the Earth molds a body. The Sun gives us our vitality, and certain Dhyanis (or meditators) give us a "mirror" of our body (also called an astral or inner shadow). A son of the fire god gives us our passions and animal instincts. Those gifts are the basis of our earthly personality. Then, however, it is pointed out that human beings also need "a mind to embrace the universe." But, alas, none of the committee can supply that. So evolution has come to a standstill.

Suddenly, however, saviours appear like Lone Rangers on white horses. They are the mānasaputras (a term that means "mind-children"); they are the offspring of cosmic intelligence, and they incarnate into the mindless earthly personalities. These mānasaputras are our individualities, our archetypes, the real "us." Our personalities, which we usually think of as ourselves, are actually only the partial and imperfect reflections of the absolutely real and permanent archetypes, which are our individualities. As Blavatsky says elsewhere:

Occult philosophy teaches us that the human mind (or lower Manas) is a direct ray or reflection of the Higher Principle, the Noëtic Mind. The latter is the reincarnating Ego which old Aryan philosophers call Manasaputra, the "Sons of Mind" or of Mahat, the Universal Cosmic Mind. [CW 12:411]

So, Theosophically speaking, archetypes are the inner or "astral" (that is, subtle) realities, of which outer forms are only the temporary expressions. With respect to us human beings, our outer earthly personalities are only the types or expressions of our inner, archetypal individualities.

2. The Archetype of the Twins

Among the many archetypes that get expressed all over the world in mythologies, literature, legends, and other ways is that of the Twins. 2 Now, the archetypal Twins are not always embodied as identical genetic twins in the world's symbolic writings. Instead, the archetype may be expressed as ordinary siblings or friends or, for that matter, enemies. The archetype may be expressed by two persons, related by blood or not, who share certain characteristics. And such shared characteristics justify those persons being thought of as two beings who have been "twinned," that is, closely associated or matched.

More particularly speaking, there are two types of archetypal Twins: Cooperating Twins and Contending Twins. Perhaps the best-known examples of the Cooperating Twins are the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux. (Dioscuri is a Greek term that might be translated as "divine boys.") Castor and Pollux were brothers, or half-brothers, both sons of Leda; but they had different fathers. Castor's father was Leda's husband, Tyndareüs, king of Sparta. Pollux's father, however, was the god Zeus, who had taken a fancy to Leda and visited her in the form of a swan. As a result of their different paternities, Castor was mortal but Pollux was immortal; yet they were brothers and firm, fast friends. They grew up together; they sailed together with the Argonauts to find the Golden Fleece; together they hunted the Caledonian boar.

Eventually, however, Castor, the mortal brother, was killed in combat, and his immortal bother, Pollux, was desolate. So Pollux went to his father Zeus and begged that he might share his immortality with his mortal bother. He proposed that they be together forever, half the time in Hades, where dead mortals went, and half the time on Mount Olympus, where the gods dwelt. Zeus was so moved by this sign of fraternal loyalty that he put both boys into the heavens as stars, where they still shine brightly in the constellation of Gemini, the Twins.

Other examples of Cooperating Twins are not hard to find. Another prominent example are the Hindu Ashvins, twin horse gods who are almost certainly historically related to the Greek Dioscuri (the Hindus and the Greeks being two peoples with closely related cultures). A Hebrew pair are David and Jonathan. (Remember that archetypal Twins

need not be genetic twins or even related, but may instead be soul mates.) Recent examples are the biological twins Fred and George Weasley in the Harry Potter series of books. Some cooperating twins are much like each other: Fred and George Weasley are examples. Others contrast sharply in some way. Thus, of the Dioscuri, Castor is mortal and Pollux is immortal.

Contending Twins are also widespread. The most famous Western examples of the archetype are Cain and Abel, of whom Cain, a farmer, slew his brother Abel, a herdsman. A similar pair consists of Romulus and Remus, twins suckled by a wolf. Romulus set out to found the city of Rome, but when Remus made fun of his early efforts, Romulus killed him. In Iran, Ahura Mazda, the "Wise Lord," emanated two spirits: Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu, the Holy Spirit and the Destructive Spirit, who are at eternal odds with each other. In Egypt, Osiris is killed and his body is mutilated by his evil twin, the god Set. The contention need not be violent: in the case of biblical Mary and Martha, Mary is studious and theoretical, whereas Martha is service-oriented and practical. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is unusual in that the contending twins are different aspects of the same person, a theme also used in Ursula LeGuin's *Wizard of Earthsea*, in which Geb and his Shadow are the same entity. The best known example of Contending Twins in current literature are Harry Potter and Voldemort, who are not even of the same generation, but who share parts of their souls and bodies with each other and so are literally soul mates and blood brothers.

In some cases, twins who might seem to be contending end up as cooperating. The Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh provides an example. Gilgamesh is a great king of the city of Uruk. He represents civilization, order, and cultivation. Enkidu is a disorderly wild man who lives among animals and roams in the wilderness. Enkidu attacks Gilgamesh, who is his opposite in almost every way, but in the resulting contest, Gilgamesh wins by strength and strategy. Order and civilization (represented by Gilgamesh) overcome disorder and primitiveness (represented by Enkidu). Enkidu, however, is so impressed with Gilgamesh's prowess that he admires the victor, so the two swear an oath of mutual loyalty

and become bosom friends for the rest of their shared lifetimes. The replacement of armed opposition by brotherly embrace is found also in the stories of King Arthur and Lancelot and of Robin Hood and Little John.

Most examples of the archetypal Twins consist of pairs whose members are of the same sex. But there are also instances of co-sexual twins. In Greek myth, Apollo and Artemis, the god of the sun and the goddess of the moon, are twin offspring of Zeus and the Titaness Leto. Japanese myth has the world (or at least the islands of Japan) created by a brother-sister pair: Izanagi and Izanami. An old standby of children's literature, the Bobbsey Twins books, describe the adventures of two sets of twins, each consisting of a brother and sister: older Bert and Nan and younger Flossie and Freddie. A more recent pair who are discovered to be twins are Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa of Star Wars.

In addition to the twins mentioned above, both cooperating and contending, others are to be found in the myths of West Africans, Mayans, Navajos, Canaanites, Sumerians, and other cultures. Why are twins so widespread in literature and myth? Jungianly speaking, we might say that twins represent the sense we have of a difference between our ego selves and some "other us." The other may be a shadow figure or a better Self; a mask or an anima/animus.

Archetypically speaking, the Twins are two aspects of us. If we wish to transform ourselves, we must first recognize who we are. Such recognition is greatly aided by myths and stories. For all archetypes are us. By observing their interaction, we learn who and what we are, and, most important, we learn how we can change. The archetype of the Twins also helps to define our relationships with other human beings: either cooperating or contending. Cooperation and contention are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, as in the myth of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, ideally contention leads to fraternal cooperation. All human relationships involve both contention and cooperation. What is needed is a balance between those opposites. And that observation brings us to Olcott and Blavatsky.

3. Olcott and Blavatsky as Twins

Archetypes have a way of expressing themselves, not just in myths and literature, but also in people's lives. In *Old Diary Leaves*, Henry Steel Olcott, referring to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and himself, famously declared, "We used to speak of our selves as the Theosophical Twins" (ODL 1.9:141). That declaration has been taken as the motto of this article. What does Olcott's declaration mean? What can we conclude, from his own words, that he intended by the declaration? And what difference does it make? Those questions are the subject of the rest of this article.

With regard to ends and commitments, Olcott and Blavatsky were embodiments of the Cooperating Twins. And that is doubtless what Olcott had in mind when he penned the line used as the motto above. But Olcott and Blavatsky were sharply different in other ways, and those differences sometimes led to their being embodiments of the Contending Twins. That combination of cooperation and contention is quite normal in human interrelationships.

Olcott and Blavatsky were alike in their total commitment to the work of the Masters. Blavatsky's lifelong devotion to the Masters was the theme of everything she did. Of Olcott, the Master K.H. wrote:

Him we can trust under all circumstances, and his faithful service is pledged to us come well, come ill. . . . Where can we find an equal devotion? He is one . . . who may make innumerable mistakes out of excessive zeal but never is unwilling to repair his fault even at the cost of the greatest self-humiliation; who esteems the sacrifice of comfort and even life something to be cheerfully risked whenever necessary; who will eat any food, or even go without; sleep on any bed, work in any place, fraternise with any outcast, endure any privation for the cause. [ML 5, 17]

It was in such faithful service, devotion, and sacrifice that Olcott and Blavatsky were twins. They were the two chief founders of the Theosophical Society and the two chief framers of what modern

Theosophy was to become—Blavatsky on the inner theoretical side and Olcott on the outer applied side. Olcott says of their relationship:

She was the Teacher, I the pupil; she the misunderstood and insulted messenger of the Great Ones, I the practical brain to plan, the right hand to work out the practical details. Under the Hindu classification, she would be the teaching Brahmin, I the fighting Kshatriya; under the Buddhist one, she would be the Bhikshu, I the working Dyākya or laic. [ODL 4.2:22-3]

Neither the Theosophical Society nor Theosophy would be what it is today if it were not for the joint work of these “Theosophical Twins.” There existed an indestructible focus of vitality in the quenchless enthusiasm of the two friends, the Russian woman and American man, who were in deadly earnest; who never for a moment harboured a doubt as to the existence of their Masters, the excellence of their delegated work, or the ultimate complete success that would crown it. . . . The one thing we felt more and more as time went on was, that we two could absolutely depend upon each other for Theosophy, though the sky itself should crack; beyond that, all depended upon circumstances. [ODL 1.9:141]

The twinship of the two friends involved more than shared ideals. A psychic connection also united them. An example of that connection was recounted by Olcott in describing a dreadful fire that occurred near Adyar while HPB was in Europe: A fearful tragedy occurred . . . in the People’s Park, Madras, during the days of the [December 1885] Convention; some three or four hundred persons were burnt alive in a panic that seized them when some palm-leaf shops and fences accidentally caught fire at a People’s Fair that was in progress. The reason for my mentioning it is that the wave of agony that it created in the Astral Light reached H. P. B. in her lodgings in Belgium, and threw her into the greatest excitement about our safety. . . .

This is a most instructive psychological phenomenon. The “wave of agony” of which I spoke touched Adyar, of course, first of all, being so near, and from me passed on to H. P. B., with whom I was spiritually so

intimately connected. . . . [Similarly] when she died in London in 1891, I was made aware of it in Sydney, N. S. W. We used to call ourselves "twins," and twins we were so far as community of sympathies within the lines of our work was concerned. No great wonder, considering how we had worked together! [ODL 3.23:343-5]

At times, efforts were made by others to drive a wedge between the twins. But their commitment to each other and to the Masters overcame all such efforts. In the course of one such divisive effort in 1887, Blavatsky wrote to Olcott from England, and Olcott reports her message:

She begs me, on the score of the "real, more than fraternal affection" she has for me, her "internal, not external, loyalty" to me as her "colleague, chum, and co-worker in Master's work," to break up the Indian part of the conspiracy. In another letter she writes; "I love you more than anyone on earth save Master, my friendship and brotherly affection for you are eternal; and if you believe me capable of going back on you, let alone the T. S., then—you are a——." Her use of the word "eternal" has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface, as those who have traced back the mutual relations of us two in past lives (both men in them all) will understand. Suffice it to say that this is not the first time that we have been closely associated in the evolutionary paths of our two entities. [ODL 4.2:24]

Disagreements arose between Olcott and Blavatsky on several occasions. Those disagreements were partly fomented by people in Europe who admired Blavatsky and wanted to break the ties with Olcott and Adyar. They were partly the result of a conflict between external and internal authority that was brought to a head by Blavatsky's intention to form an Esoteric School answering to her alone. In 1888, Olcott took ship to England, intending to put down what he judged to be an incipient insurrection. On board ship, he received a letter from the Master K.H., which included the following:

H.P.B. has next to no concern with administrative details, and should be kept clear of them, so far as her strong nature can be controlled. But this you must tell to all: —With occult matters she has everything to do.

We have not abandoned her; she is not 'given over to chelas'. She is our direct agent. I warn you against permitting your suspicions and resentment against 'her many follies' to bias your intuitive loyalty to her. In the adjustment of this European business, you will have two things to consider—the external and administrative, and the internal and psychical. Keep the former under your control and that of your most prudent associates, jointly: leave the latter to her. You are left to devise the practical details with your usual ingenuity. Only be careful, I say, . . . when some emergent interference of hers in practical affairs is referred to you on appeal, [to discriminate] between that which is merely exoteric in origin and effects, and that which beginning on the practical tends to beget consequences on the spiritual plane. As to the former you are the best judge, as to the latter, she. [LMW 1.19,46]

The Master's comment defines, as well as anything can, the respective spheres, responsibilities, and mutual interaction of the two "Theosophical Twins." However, their mutual interaction is more than merely a historical fact. It is also the reflection of an archetypal reality.

4. The Theosophical Twins and Us

The archetypal Twins stand for the relationship each of us should have with others. All of us are twins. We are as closely related with one another as it is possible to be—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. When we interact with one another, we will sometimes have conflicts, just as Olcott and Blavatsky did. But if we are inspired by the wise example of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, we will transform our conflict with one another into cooperation, and our cooperation will be the stronger and wiser for growing out of friendly conflict. That is precisely what happened in the lives of Olcott and Blavatsky. It is what needs to happen in the lives of each of us as we interact with our fellows.

The archetypal Twins also stand for two aspects inside each one of us. One aspect is our higher individuality, our "Archetype," and the other aspect is our lower personality, the reflection in time and space of that individual "Archetype." Our personality's empirical and pragmatic mind has everything to do with the external and practical in our lives, just as

Olcott did with the administrative affairs of the Society. Our individuality's intuitive and noetic mind has everything to do with the internal and spiritual in our lives, just as Blavatsky did with the spiritual affairs of Theosophy. These two aspects of our nature, personality and individuality, are, as it were, our Olcott and Blavatsky—both necessary and indispensable, but each properly in charge of its own distinct sphere in our lives.

Olcott and Blavatsky, the "Theosophical Twins," are part of history. But as reflections of ahistorical, archetypal reality, they are also part of us. This is true because, as the Emerald Tablet says, "What is Below is like what is Above, and what is Above is like what is Below, for accomplishing the wonders of the one thing." The "one thing" is the conscious realization of the unity of all existence: of our lower and higher selves, of each of us with every other, of all of us with the One Reality that underlies all existence. In that realization are wonders indeed. And to achieve that realization, we can do no better than follow in the archetypal footsteps of the "Theosophical Twins."

Notes:

1. References to H. S. Olcott's Old Diary Leaves (ODL) are by volume, chapter, and page(s). Reference to the Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett (ML) is to the chronological edition by letter number and page. Reference to Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom (LMW) is by volume or series number, letter number, and page.

2. For orthographical convenience in this text, when "Twin" refers to the archetype, it is capitalized; when "twin" refers to embodiments of the archetype or to genetic twins, it is lower-case. In quotations, the original spelling is preserved.

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