

Reincarnation in H. P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine**

Julie Chajes

E-mail: juliechajes@gmail.com

Abstract

Throughout her career as an occultist, H. P. Blavatsky (1831–1891), the primary theorist of the nineteenth century's most influential occultist movement, the Theosophical Society, taught two distinct theories of rebirth: metempsychosis and reincarnation. This paper provides a detailed description of the latter, as outlined in Blavatsky's magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and contemporaneous publications. In so doing, it offers several correctives and refinements to scholarly analyses of Theosophical reincarnationism offered over the last thirty years.

Keywords

H. P. Blavatsky, Theosophical Society, Reincarnation

* The publication of this paper was made possible by grants from The Blavatsky Trust and the Israel Science Foundation. With thanks to Jake Poller for helpful comments on an earlier draft, and to the editors of this journal.

Introduction

This paper provides a detailed description of reincarnation as taught by the influential Russian esotericist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) in her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and contemporaneous publications. Blavatsky made numerous remarks on human rebirth throughout her voluminous writings, which were published over the greater part of two decades, beginning in the early 1870s. Because of the apparently contradictory nature of some of these statements, there has been no little confusion among academics about Blavatsky's views on the matter. This paper clarifies the issue.

From the 1870s until around 1882, Blavatsky taught a doctrine she called “metempsychosis” that was distinct from the reincarnation theory of her later period. In the works of this earlier period (most notably *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877), she claimed all humans have a soul in addition to a spirit and body. Occultists could achieve immortality during life on Earth by conjoining spirit and soul through practices such as astral projection. If they succeeded, after death, the conjoined soul-spirit entity would begin a journey of metempsychosis through higher spheres, reaching nirvana in the seventh and final sphere. In her earlier teachings, Blavatsky occasionally allowed for something she called “reincarnation,” by which she meant the return to life of a spirit with the same soul for a second time. This occurred in such cases as the deaths of foetuses and congenital idiots, so they would have a fair chance at achieving immortality.¹

In contrast, in *The Secret Doctrine* Blavatsky saw the spirit as intrinsically immortal, and maintained it was normal for it to incarnate repeatedly, each time attaching itself to a different mortal soul and body, thereby living many lives on Earth. Furthermore, she claimed that just as a person lives, dies, and is reborn, so do planets and even the cosmos live, die, and “reincarnate.” Blavatsky's contemporaries noted the discrepancies between her earlier and later teachings. In an article of 1882 (and then again in 1886), she responded by trying to harmonise her divergent accounts to claim she had taught the same reincarnation doctrine all along.² Although she was being somewhat disingenuous, in a sense, she was

¹ I explain this doctrine in detail in Julie Chajes, “Metempsychosis and Reincarnation in *Isis Unveiled*,” *Theosophical History* 16 (2012). On Blavatsky's earlier doctrine and its kinship with Anglo-American Spiritualist and occultist currents, see Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 358. On Blavatsky's rejection of French Spiritist reincarnation, see 281. See also Joscelyn Godwin, Christian Chanel, and John P. Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Initiatic and Historical Documents of an Order of Practical Occultism* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995), 41, 57–60.

² H. P. Blavatsky, “‘Isis Unveiled’ and The ‘Theosophist’ on Reincarnation,” *The Theosophist* 3

telling the truth. She had previously taught a *type* of (occasional) “reincarnation,” it just wasn’t the same sort of reincarnation she later affirmed.

The present article will explore Blavatsky’s later ideas thoroughly, but why is such an exploration necessary? Theosophy has attracted considerable attention from academics in recent decades, largely because of its influence on the development of numerous artistic, literary, religious, and political movements.³ For example, Theosophy impacted heavily on the development of modern forms of Buddhism in Ceylon (as well as globally), Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) had an interest in Theosophy, and Theosophists played an important role in the establishment of the Indian National Congress.⁴ Theosophy has also spawned numerous other movements.⁵ Perhaps the best known of these is Anthroposophy, which has a strong presence worldwide in diverse areas, including education.⁶ There have been several academic studies of the Theosophical Society and of individual Theosophists, but these have not tended to go into much detail on Theosophical tenets. This study takes a

(August 1882), 288–89 and “Theories about Reincarnation and Spirits,” *The Path* 1 (November 1886), 232–45. She wrote the latter in Ostende, Belgium, in October 1886, and it appeared as an appendix in subsequent editions of *Isis Unveiled*.

³ On Theosophy in Russian literature, see Eugene Kuzmin, “Maximilian Voloshin and the Kabbalah,” in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016). On Theosophy and the visual arts, see Victoria Ferentinou, “Light From Within or Light From Above,” and Massimo Introvigne, “Lawren Harris and the Theosophical Appropriation of Canadian Nationalism,” both in *Theosophical Appropriations*. See also Tessel Bauduin, “The Occult and the Visual Arts,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

⁴ On the impact of Theosophy on Buddhism, see Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). On Gandhi, see Michael Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014). On Theosophy and the Indian National Congress, see W. Travis Hanes Jr, “On the Origins of the Indian National Congress: A Case Study of Cross-Cultural Synthesis,” *Journal of World History* 4 (1993). See also Shimon Lev, “Gandhi and his Jewish Theosophist Supporters in South Africa,” in *Theosophical Appropriations*.

⁵ On movements deriving from Theosophy, see Kevin Tingay, “Madame Blavatsky’s Children: Theosophy and Its Heirs,” in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, eds. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). See also Robert S. Ellwood, “The American Theosophical Synthesis,” in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, eds. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 111.

⁶ On the presence and influence of Anthroposophy in Germany, see Helmut Zander, “Transformations of Anthroposophy from the Death of Rudolf Steiner to the Present Day,” in *Theosophical Appropriations*. On the connection between Anthroposophy and Theosophy, see Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Milieus und gesellschaftliche Praxis, 1884 bis 1945*. 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007).

different approach, maintaining that a proper historicisation is only possible once a complete exploration of the ideas themselves has been carried out.

A second justification for paying so much close attention to Blavatsky's reincarnation doctrine has to do with Theosophy's influence on patterns of religiosity today. Theosophy and its numerous offshoots have had a profound influence on the development of modern forms of religion, especially the New Age Movement and related alternative spiritualities that emerged in the wake of the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ Reincarnation belief is often found in these milieus, and indeed, much more generally, among people in the largely Christian West who have no special identification with Asian religions. A century and a half ago, this was not the case. Theosophy played an important role in bringing about these shifts, and Blavatsky's ideas are fundamental to understanding them.

Thirdly, and finally, a guide to Blavatsky's reincarnation doctrine is needed because it is not possible to simply open one of her books and discover what she taught without considerable effort. Blavatsky has a (somewhat deserved) reputation for confusing, convoluted prose, and this has sometimes led to the dismissal of her works and ideas. This is unfortunate. The present article assists the novice or even somewhat experienced reader of Blavatsky, bringing her teachings on reincarnation into focus by drawing together the short, disconnected expositions she scattered throughout her writings. It reveals a clear "microcosmic" theory of human rebirth that has an important "macrocosmic" context that has not yet been discussed in the scholarly literature. This is offered as a contribution to the growing appreciation, both in the academic world and more widely, of H. P. Blavatsky as an important and influential thinker of the nineteenth century.

Academic Literature on Theosophical Reincarnation

Among the growing body of scholarly literature on Theosophy and related topics, a handful of studies specifically address Theosophical reincarnation.

⁷ On the connection between reincarnation belief in present-day America, the New Age, and Theosophy, see Courtney Bender, "American Reincarnations: What the Many Lives of Past Lives Tell us about Contemporary Spiritual Practice," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007). On the New Age Movement in general, see Paul Heelas's pioneering study, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). On the definition of "New Age," see George D. Chryssides, "Defining the New Age," in *Handbook of the New Age*, eds. Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007). See also James R. Lewis, "Science and the New Age," in *Handbook of the New Age*, eds. Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

The close reading of Blavatsky's writings that follows reveals their strengths and weaknesses. In "In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement" (1986), Ronald Neufeldt argues karma and rebirth could be regarded as "the two pillars upon which all of Theosophical teaching rests."⁸ A convincing case could certainly be made for this claim. He notes Bruce Campbell's view that reincarnation seems absent from *Isis Unveiled*,⁹ but maintains there is evidence Blavatsky's first major work includes notions of karma and rebirth in "substantially the same form as these ideas are found in Blavatsky's later works."

There is no reason to suggest that [*Isis Unveiled*] should not be read to mean that the eternal monad evolves through a series of human incarnations as well as other incarnations. The difficulty with Blavatsky's works lies not so much in radical shifts in her line of thinking. Rather it lies in an obviously sloppy use of terms or terminology and in the fact that in any given paragraph the discussion proceeds on two or more levels. Whether this was deliberate or not is difficult to say.¹⁰

Although there are elements of the metempsychosis doctrine of *Isis Unveiled* that re-appear in *The Secret Doctrine*, there is every reason to conclude that *Isis Unveiled* taught a different theory. I explained the doctrines of Blavatsky's earlier period in a previous publication, and the present article reveals a theory that is very different. The reason for confusion among scholars *is* in fact "radical shifts in her line of thinking," and not Blavatsky's supposed "sloppy use of terms or terminology" or multiple intentions, as Neufeldt claims. Blavatsky's choice of words could sometimes be equivocal, but her intentions were usually quite clear. Finally, Neufeldt argues Blavatsky's rebirth teachings were utopian in character:

The teaching of karma and rebirth in Blavatsky's writings is essentially a charter for the establishment of utopia and utopian hopes... I would argue that Blavatsky's concern is to establish the beliefs in karma and rebirth because of the benefits and advantages which she feels would result from the acceptance of these beliefs. Her concern is less with the details of the teachings than with spreading the good news about karma and rebirth. Detail that is given is often given only in response to charges of confusion, ambiguity, and contradiction.¹¹

⁸ Ronald Neufeldt, "In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement," in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald W. Neufeldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

⁹ Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revisited: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 29.

¹⁰ Neufeldt, "In Search of Utopia," 233–34; H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1877).

¹¹ Neufeldt, "In Search of Utopia," 250.

Blavatsky's inspiration may have been utopian in the sense that Theosophy emphasised universal brotherhood and the reformation of religious and scientific views, but in contradistinction to what Neufeldt says here, she was very much concerned with the details of her teachings, as the present article will demonstrate.

Robert S. Ellwood's "Obligatory Pilgrimage: Reincarnation in the Theosophical Tradition" (1996) deals with reincarnation in two of Blavatsky's later publications, *The Secret Doctrine* and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889).¹² Ellwood notes the diffusion of Theosophical lodges and texts across America during the twentieth century and correctly observes, "Probably no single organization has done more to popularize the concept of reincarnation in the English-speaking world, including the United States, than the Theosophical Society."¹³ Ellwood notes that Theosophical reincarnation has been labelled "syncretistic," a term often maligned. This is unjust, he rightly maintains, because all religions are "syncretistic" to some extent. Noting the influence on Blavatsky of diverse global reincarnationist traditions, Ellwood states that the Theosophical synthesis took a specific form that reflected Blavatsky's notion of the "ancient wisdom" tradition:

It is often assumed that Theosophists simply introduced "Eastern" doctrines to the West. Apart from the dubious assumption that there is any one notion of reincarnation in "the East" to apply, the fact is that Theosophy has drawn as much or more from Western sources in this matter as Eastern. While Eastern terms, largely Sanskrit, have been employed, so that karma and logos juxtapose, the original schema was as Gnostic and Kabbalistic as Buddhist.¹⁴

Ellwood concludes that in *The Secret Doctrine*, "despite the sometime Sanskrit diction, we are basically in the world of Gnostic or Kabbalistic myth, of the fall of the soul into matter as it ventures out on a great and heroic quest, the search for the Pearl of Wisdom or the Lost Beloved, then makes the return and finally receives the victor's laurels."¹⁵ He also considers Blavatsky's language to resonate with neo-Platonism more than with Buddhism.

As much as Blavatsky's doctrine of reincarnation encompassed her interpretations of neo-Platonism and Buddhism (among other things), Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) demonstrates that her views were also indebted to

¹² Robert S. Ellwood, "Obligatory Pilgrimage: Reincarnation in the Theosophical Tradition," in *Concepts of Transmigration: Perspectives on Reincarnation*, ed. Steven J. Kaplan (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 189–202.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 190–91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

European progressivist or evolutionary doctrines of ascendant metempsychosis that had been articulated from the eighteenth century forward.¹⁶ Hanegraaff notes that the similarity between ascendant metempsychosis and reincarnation meant it was unsurprising the two had frequently been confused.¹⁷ Discussing increasing interest in reincarnation since the Enlightenment, he observes that the idea of having lived many previous lives resonated with an emerging historical consciousness.¹⁸ Increasing awareness of Hinduism certainly contributed to the popularity of reincarnation, but there were also many Western sources for the doctrine, such as Platonism, Pythagoreanism, and Kabbalah, and philosophers such as Henry More (1614–1687) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).¹⁹ Western rebirth theories were typically offered as explanations for spiritual progress or evolution and therefore, Hanegraaff argues, the idea of rebirth as such was secondary to concern with the continual improvement of humanity.

Theosophical reincarnationism and evolutionism, observes Hanegraaff, both had their origins in the eighteenth century “temporalization of the Great Chain of Being,” a hierarchical organisation of the cosmos based on Platonic thought.²⁰ In Theosophy, reincarnation was given as one possible elaboration of the more general idea of progressive ascent through this chain of being.²¹ Progressive ascent or evolution — rather than reincarnation itself — was therefore primary.

For Blavatsky, progressive spiritual evolutionism was far more central than the belief in reincarnation *per se*. She certainly did not adopt evolutionism in order to explain the reincarnation process for a modern western audience; what she did was to assimilate the theory of *karma* within an already-existing western framework of spiritual progress....Karma was adopted in order to provide this evolutionism with a theory of “scientific” causality.²²

Hanegraaff is correct that Blavatsky assimilated a theory of karma into an existing progressivist framework, that karma provided a form of scientific causality, and that this had a place in Blavatsky’s evolutionary theory. However, this does not necessarily mean reincarnation was secondary to karma in Blavatsky’s thought. It is clear from Blavatsky’s own explicit statements that by the time she wrote

¹⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden, New York, Köln, 1996), 473.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 474–75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 478.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 476–77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 472.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 478.

²² *Ibid.*, 471–72.

The Secret Doctrine, she conceived of *karmic reincarnation* as essential for theodicy (the vindication of divine justice). Demonstrating that, despite appearances, the cosmos was fair was a pivotal concern in Blavatsky's discussions of reincarnation, in which she explained that the apparent injustices of life were due to the karmic effects of forgotten deeds performed long ago during previous lifetimes (probably during the Atlantean root race). In such passages, one of which I cite below, reincarnation was not presented as an afterthought in a grand karmic evolutionary scheme, but rather as intrinsic to Blavatsky's justification for the seemingly unjust distribution of wealth and abilities, and this is why Blavatsky insisted karma and reincarnation were "inextricably interwoven."²³

A second reason that reincarnation is not secondary to karma in Blavatsky is her universal application of reincarnation to all realms of existence, making it a ubiquitous force in the progress of the cosmos. Universes, solar systems, and planets were all said to reincarnate. Reincarnation was therefore a fundamental principle of Theosophy. On the other hand, karma was not. As we will see below, for Blavatsky, karma was not present during all stages of human history. It came into being only once humans had developed egos. Before that (as well as during and after) Blavatsky saw evolution as propelled by other factors, such as the assistance of higher beings and the universe's inherent tendency towards progression.²⁴

Helmut Zander (1999) exposes numerous forms of European reincarnation belief and includes a chapter on Theosophy in his history of European reincarnationism. Zander correctly identifies Blavatsky's differentiation of her own doctrine from Spiritualist ones, her knowledge of the term "metempsychosis" and — by implication — Greek reincarnation theories, and her awareness of the supposed reincarnationism of the Egyptians and the Bible. Zander points out some of the basic propositions of *The Secret Doctrine* and notes Blavatsky presented reincarnation in the context of pantheism, although he concludes that a meaningful summary is not simple to achieve. Indeed, Zander argues that a systematic exposition of Theosophical reincarnation is impossible, a claim I disprove in what follows.

Zander contends that Blavatsky's adoption of reincarnation in *The Secret Doctrine* reflects Theosophy's later contact with Asian thought. Although

²³ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, 2 vols. (1888. Facsimile of the first edition, London: Theosophical University Press, 2014) 2:303.

²⁴ This was an idea that resonated with contemporaneous scientific theories of orthogenesis, the idea that evolution is caused by something internal to the evolving organism. This and other influences on Blavatsky's rebirth theories will be discussed in my forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Recycled Lives*, to be published by Oxford University Press in 2018.

Blavatsky was acquainted with European sources for reincarnation, she took them seriously only via the “midwifery” of Asia. Developing this argument, Zander writes that occasionally Blavatsky’s debt to Asian sources is unmistakable, such as in her theory of the incarnation of Buddhas and of Krishna, in which she depicts reincarnation as suffering, or when she describes the “nirvanis” as “those who have enjoyed their rest from reincarnations.” It is important, however, to differentiate between Blavatsky’s different rebirth theories. The theory of the incarnation of divine beings (Buddhas and *avatars*) is distinct from Blavatsky’s various doctrines of human rebirth, and must be treated separately.

Zander asserts that the relative presence of European and Asian components in Blavatsky’s theory of reincarnation cannot be determined through a reading of *The Secret Doctrine* and that the construction of Blavatsky’s theory of reincarnation is highly complex and includes both Asian and European ideas, as well as European conceptions received through the medium of Asia. Blavatsky integrates all these into a European context. Zander concludes that in light of this historical construction, the question of Blavatsky possessing an “Asian” or “European” model of reincarnation is difficult and, to some extent, inappropriate.²⁵ These observations on the category-defying nature of Blavatsky’s thought are astute and anticipate recognition of the cultural “entanglement” of Theosophy found in more recent studies.²⁶

Olav Hammer (2001) approaches Theosophical reincarnation from a different perspective, analysing the multiple strategies involved in the legitimisation of the belief. He observes that the reincarnationists of the 1850s to 1880s based themselves on revealed teachings (spirit sources, Mahatmas, or divine revelations). For Blavatsky, this caused problems when contradictions between the reincarnation doctrines of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* were alleged. How could the Masters have changed their minds? Subsequent letters from the Mahatmas attempted to clarify the discrepancies and by 1883, *Esoteric Buddhism*, by the important early Theosophist Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), had “followed Blavatsky’s lead in adopting reincarnation.”²⁷ Importantly, Hammer

²⁵ Zander, *Seelenwanderung*, 480–81.

²⁶ See especially Karl Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the *Cakras* in Early Theosophy,” in *Theosophical Appropriations* and Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth.”

²⁷ Although *Esoteric Buddhism* was the first Theosophical work in which the new theory of reincarnation was laid out relatively fully, there was a disagreement between Sinnett and Blavatsky over the nature of the planetary chain within which reincarnation was said to take place. Sinnett claimed that a Mahatma letter had stated that Mars and Mercury were part of the Earth Chain but Blavatsky denied this, claiming instead that Mars and Mercury were each

notes that *The Mahatma Letters* and *Esoteric Buddhism* utilise “discursive strategies of science and tradition.”²⁸ Sanskrit terms were also brought in, testifying to the admired Oriental “other” of the Theosophists. From 1888, with the publication of *The Secret Doctrine* and other more accessible Theosophical works, reincarnation became “one of the core elements” of what was arguably the “most influential esoteric movement of the late nineteenth century.” Reincarnation was legitimized through the discursive strategy of the “construction of tradition,” whereby an ancient manuscript was posited as the source for Theosophical teachings. Hammer concludes, “Implicitly, reincarnation had passed in six years from being a controversial innovation to becoming a central tenet of all the religious traditions of the world — or at least of the esoteric aspect of each of these traditions.”²⁹ He observes that Blavatsky built on elements deriving from several different sources.³⁰ Despite this bricolage, her overall conception was novel. Theosophical reincarnation involved a typically nineteenth-century construction involving Orientalism, an evolutionary emphasis, and the division of humanity into races. Hammer describes Blavatsky’s theory as a “peak of modern myth-making” as well as an “abstract narrative” that dealt with humanity collectively rather than the individual.³¹ His observations add important extra dimensions to our understanding of Blavatsky’s reincarnationism.

Blavatsky’s Reincarnationary Macrocosm

Blavatsky taught that our universe is one of many in a great “cosmic chain” of universes, each of which arose (“reincarnated”) after the demise of the previous one.³² Over the course of its life, each universe was said to repeatedly manifest and disappear, as though sleeping and waking.³³ The ultimate goal of the cyclic appearances and disappearances of the universes was supposed to be the increasing “self-consciousness” of the Divine. Blavatsky said the Divine would achieve this self-consciousness through the periodic exhibition

part of their own planetary chain. See “Mars and Mercury” in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, ed. A. T. Barker (London: T. F. Unwin, 1923), 489–92.

²⁸ Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 466–67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 467.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 468.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 469.

³² For example, Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 43.

³³ For example, Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 16.

of different aspects of itself to “finite minds,” i.e. humans.³⁴ It would attain this through the evolution of humans from lower forms of life.³⁵ How was this to take place? According to Blavatsky, universes were living entities constituted of spirit and matter, in fact, two aspects of the same substance. She considered spirit primary because matter arose from it. Spirit carried the ideas that gave rise to matter, and consciousness arose from the union of spirit with matter at a specific point in evolutionary history. Although they would separate during the course of the universe’s lifetime, on a deeper level, spirit and matter were inseparable, and continuously and simultaneously repelled and attracted one another. “So do Spirit and Matter stand to each other,” Blavatsky wrote, “The two poles of the same homogeneous substance, the root-principle of the universe.”³⁶ Blavatsky claimed spirit and matter were linked by something called Fohat, which functioned like a bridge by which divine ideas were impressed on the material world as “laws of nature.” It was an animating principle that brought atoms to life.³⁷ Describing Fohat in terms of *eros*, or attraction, she characterised it as a kind of “affinity,” “intelligence” or even “guide,” although she was adamant it was not a personal God.³⁸

From a state of cosmic rest, spirit was said to “fall” into matter and be required to find its way back to its original condition. Blavatsky called the change from matter to spirit evolution, and from spirit to matter, involution. During involution, spirit would “involve” into matter and “appear.” Thereafter, it would gradually evolve back into spirit again, disappearing. Blavatsky described the periodic appearance and disappearance of the universe as the “outbreathing” and “inbreathing” of the great breath.³⁹ The time it took for the cosmos to complete one out-breath and one in-breath was known in Sanskrit as a *manvantara*.⁴⁰ During the involutory phase of the cosmos at the beginning of a *manvantara*, the divine source (known in Sanskrit as *parabrahman*) emitted *mulaprakriti* (matter). Subsequent levels were thereafter emanated. Straightforwardly put, emanation is a concept reminiscent of a champagne fountain in which the champagne cascades from the bottle into the glass at the top and thereafter into the glasses beneath. In the religious or philosophical theory, the metaphorical champagne bottle never empties; the Divine continually emanates without diminution into the various levels of the cosmos it

³⁴ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 487.

³⁵ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 106–07.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 119, 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰ It is important to note that Blavatsky used the term *manvantara* to describe different periods. I refer here to a *manvantara* of the universe.

produces. Prominent in neo-Platonic, Gnostic, and Kabbalistic thought, many different variants of this basic idea have been proposed throughout the centuries.

In Blavatsky's version, after the Divine had emitted *mulaprakriti*, a second level emerged. This was known as the "first" or "un-manifested" logos. It was followed by the second logos, known as "the demiurge," which amounted to an aggregate or "army" of sentient beings called *dhyan chobans*, who functioned as the architects of the universe and agents of karma.⁴¹ The next emanation was the Universal Soul, the source of a finite number of monads, or immortal, reincarnating entities.⁴² Blavatsky described the Universal Soul as "a compound unity of manifested living Spirits, the parent-source and nursery of all the mundane and terrestrial monads, plus their *divine* reflection."⁴³ In other words, the Universal Soul was not merely a collective of monads but was also independent of and mirrored them.

All monads were said to enter the cycle of incarnation at the beginning of the universe's *manvantara*. With each incarnation, a monad would acquire a new personality. Through the monad's assimilation of successive temporary personalities, it would spiritualise, overcoming what Blavatsky called "the delusions of *maya*."⁴⁴ It would thus become increasingly aware of the impermanent and illusory nature of the cosmos and more conscious of its own identity with the Universal Soul. Finally, it would be reabsorbed into the Divine.⁴⁵ Blavatsky termed this re-absorption *paranirvana*. *Paranirvana* was followed by a pause, called a *pralaya*, during which the universe rested before repeating the whole process once more.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 380. Describing the roles of these different emanations, the first logos has the "idea" and the second logos, constituted of the *dhyan chobans*, draws up the "plan" (Ibid., 279–80). Blavatsky considered these beings analogous to angels in Christianity, the "elohim" of Jewish scriptures, and the *Dhyani-Buddhas* of Buddhism (Ibid., 10, 38, 274). There are inferior beings among them, but no "devils" (*Secret Doctrine II*, 487). On *dhyan chobans* as agents of karma, see *Secret Doctrine I*, 122–23.

⁴² Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 16–17, note. The term "monad" can have a wider meaning too, but we will focus here on this meaning. For example, see Ibid., 21.

⁴³ Ibid., 573.

⁴⁴ "The Universe is called, with everything in it, MAYA, because all is temporary therein, from the ephemeral life of a fire-fly to that of the Sun. Compared to the eternal immutability of the ONE, and the changelessness of that Principle, the Universe, with its evanescent ever-changing forms, must be necessarily, in the mind of a philosopher, no better than a will-o'-the-wisp. Yet, the Universe is real enough to the conscious beings in it, which are as unreal as it is itself." (Ibid., 274)

⁴⁵ Ibid., 130–31, 268.

⁴⁶ Again, there are different types of *pralaya*, and I refer here to the cosmic variety. On *pralaya*, see Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 307. On the re-awakening of monads after *pralaya*, see *Secret Doctrine I*, 21.

Blavatsky conceived all of life as participating in this reincarnationary journey. Those incarnated today as humans were once less evolved life forms such as animals and plants, and those incarnated as *dhyān chohans* were once people.⁴⁷ Even the *dhyān chohans* had not finished evolving, and would go on to become still higher beings. Evolution, Blavatsky maintained, was endless, but what compelled it? Blavatsky gave three answers to this question. The first was the universe's inherent tendency to evolve, the second was the assistance of higher beings, and the third was the action of karma. Let's look at each of these in more detail.

The Monad's Planetary Journey

A “life wave” was the name Blavatsky gave to a collection of monads evolving more or less together. The life wave present-day humans were part of had progressed through the earlier stages of cosmic evolution together. Karma only became a factor in their evolutionary journey at a specific point. Before then, they had not experienced karma because they had possessed no egos and no intellectual faculties (*manas*). Nevertheless, they still evolved. This was because the evolutionary process of a life wave was rather like a conveyor belt (my simile, not Blavatsky's). Higher beings had assisted the monads in getting onto this conveyor belt in the first place, and, once on it, everyone evolved no matter what. Once the monads reached a certain stage of human evolution, it was as though the life wave had reached the end of the conveyor belt and the monads would thereafter have to continue through their own effort. In other words, they had to get off the belt and start walking. This was because by this point, humans had evolved egos as well as intellectual and rational faculties, and were now held responsible for their actions.⁴⁸ Karma had a decisive role during this stage of evolution, because rational apprehension of its effects could impel a person to think and behave in a more spiritual way.

Blavatsky claimed there were many solar systems and that within them, each planet was merely the visible globe within a system of seven spheres, the other six of which were invisible and existed on different planes of reality.⁴⁹ Thus,

⁴⁷ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 277.

⁴⁸ *Manas* (the principle associated with the ego) was “held responsible for all the sins committed through, and in, every new body or personality — the evanescent masks which hide the true individual through the long series of rebirths” (H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London and New York: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1889), 136).

⁴⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 166. Describing the six invisible spheres that surrounded

six invisible spheres surrounded the other planets of our solar system, as well as the moon. The Earth with its six invisible planets was known as the Earth Chain. In a diagram Blavatsky provided in *The Secret Doctrine*, she represented the Earth as the lowest globe (Globe D), with six more above it (three on each side) in ascending order of spirituality.⁵⁰ On the left of the Earth were Globes A, B, and C, and on the right Globes E, F, and G. Moving down from the top of this diagram, Globes A and G were on the highest level of spirituality, B and F the next down, and C and E followed. Within the Earth Chain, evolution began on Globe A before continuing on Globes B, C, D, and so forth. Humans incarnated on Earth today formerly evolved on Globe C, a sphere slightly more spiritual and less material than the Earth.⁵¹ After they had completed their evolution there, they incarnated on Earth. Once evolution on Earth was complete, life would withdraw and continue its evolution on Globe E, which was as spiritual as Globe C had been. Despite the equivalence in spirituality of Globes C and E, it was not the case that humanity would simply return to the same spiritual condition on Globe E that it experienced on Globe C. Through having lived numerous lives on Earth and assimilating those experiences, the monads would have become more conscious, and moved closer to the divine absorption that was the ultimate goal of their peregrinations.

Blavatsky termed a tour of a life wave around the seven globes a “round.” Just as the universe experienced a *manvantara* (active period) followed by a *pralaya* (rest period), so too did the planetary chain. There were seven rounds in each active period of the planetary chain, meaning the monads circled through Globes A-G seven times. Every time a life wave completed a round, there was a period of rest called an “obscuration.” Once the life wave had been around seven times, however, the planetary chain itself would begin to die out. This was known as a “planetary dissolution” and the life wave would thereafter transfer to a different planetary chain.⁵² According to Blavatsky, the Lunar Chain was where the beings now within the Earth Chain previously evolved.⁵³ She wrote that occultists termed the transference of life from one planetary chain to another the “rebirth of planetary chains.” Just as humans left behind shells (i.e. dead physical bodies), so did planets. Said Blavatsky: “Every such

planet Earth, Blavatsky explained they “blended with our world — interpenetrating it and interpenetrated by it” (*Secret Doctrine I*, 605).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 172.

⁵¹ Ibid., 158–59.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 172.

chain of worlds is the progeny and creation of another, *lower*, and *dead* chain — *its reincarnation*, so to say.”⁵⁴

Those incarnated as humans today were thought to have already completed three and a half rounds within the Earth chain, meaning they had travelled from Globe A to Globe G three times before arriving again at Globe D. From its spiritual state at entry, as it progressed through the first three and a half rounds, the monad gradually became more material, only beginning to re-spiritualise after passing the midpoint of the planetary chain on globe D, the Earth. Entering the chain at the ethereal Globe A, the monad was “shot down by the law of Evolution into the lowest form of matter — the mineral.” The precise order in which it would then inhabit the different forms on each globe was never made entirely clear, although there were some indications. Quoting an “extract from the teacher’s letter on various topics,” Blavatsky wrote: “During the 1st round...(heavenly) man becomes a human being on globe A (rebecomes) a mineral, a plant, an animal, on globe B and C, etc. The process changes entirely from the second round.”⁵⁵ The idea seems to have been that at least during the first round, on each globe, the monad would pass through what we might call mineral, vegetable, animal and human forms before doing the same on the next globe. Blavatsky clarified that the so-called stones, plants, animals, and humans on other globes were not as we know them, but rather the “germ seeds” of what we would now recognise.⁵⁶ This is because on each globe, these forms were appropriate to the overall level of materiality of that particular globe.⁵⁷ In other words, a spiritual monad enters globe A at the lowest level of matter for that globe, something that resembles the stones we are familiar with on this globe.

Blavatsky explained that the most developed of the monads entering the Earth Chain “reach the human germ-stage in the first Round; become ter-

⁵⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁵ An undated letter from Mahatma Koot Hoomi states: “At each round there are less and less animals — the latter themselves evolving [sic] into higher forms. During the first Round it is *they* that were the ‘kings of *creation*.’ During the seventh men will have become *Gods* and animals — intelligent beings. Draw your inferences. Beginning with the second round already evolution proceeds on quite a different plan. Everything is evolved and has but to proceed on its cyclic journey and get perfected. It is only the first Round that man becomes from a human being on Globe B. a mineral, a plant, an animal on Planet C. The method changes entirely from the second Round; but — I have learned prudence with you; and will say *nothing* before the time for saying has come. Letter 23 B in Barker ed., *The Mahatma Letters*, 177–178.

⁵⁶ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 186.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 180.

restrial, though very ethereal human beings towards the end of the Third Round, remaining on it (the globe) through the ‘obscuration’ period as the seed for future mankind in the Fourth Round, and thus become the pioneers of Humanity at the beginning of this, the Fourth Round.”⁵⁸ From the middle turning point of the fourth round no more monads would be allowed to enter the human kingdom; if they hadn’t made it to the human stage yet, they would have to wait until the next *manvantara*.⁵⁹ Although Blavatsky referred to beings from previous rounds as representing humanity, strictly speaking she claimed that the monad was not a “man” as such until “the Light of the Logos” was awakened in him. Until then, he should not “be referred to as ‘MAN,’ but has to be regarded as a Monad imprisoned in ever changing forms.”⁶⁰ For “man” to develop, the monad had to acquire “a spiritual model, or prototype.” It needed “an intelligent consciousness to guide its evolution and progress.” This is where the *pitris* came in, higher beings who descended to assist in the evolution of humanity by deliberately blending spirit with matter, and this occurred at a specific point in the evolution that took place on Globe D, the Earth.⁶¹

The Monad’s Racial Journey

On Earth, the development of human life wave was divided into seven consecutive stages, known as “root races,” each containing seven sub-races.⁶² A monad was required to pass through all seven of these root-races during its evolutionary journey.⁶³ Blavatsky only described in detail the root races of the Earth, stating that “we are not concerned with the other Globes in this work, except incidentally.”⁶⁴ In her account, previous root races lived on continents that no longer existed and their periods of existence were divided from one other by great convolutions of nature, resulting in a lack of physical evidence for their existence.⁶⁵ These convolutions weren’t punishments but simply the

⁵⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 182.

⁵⁹ Although all the rocks, plants and animals in the world today would eventually become men, this wouldn’t occur in this *manvantara*. *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 42.

⁶¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 247.

⁶² Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 434–35. Each sub-race has seven branch or family races.

⁶³ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 160. See also H. P. Blavatsky, “Theosophy and Spiritism,” in vol. 5 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1950), 45.

⁶⁴ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 160.

⁶⁵ “Our globe is subject to seven periodical entire changes which go *pari passu* with the

natural course of events. Wrote Blavatsky, “Such is the fate of every continent, which — like everything else under our Sun — is born, lives, becomes decrepit, and dies.⁶⁶ After the appearance and disappearance of every continent with its root race there was said to be a period of rest before the next race appeared on the next continent. Root races were initially more ethereal, gradually becoming more material, evolving physically and morally and becoming more solid until their physical evolution had reached its fullest extent. This was human incarnation as we know it, the mid-point of the Earth Chain’s cycle. After this, the process of spiritualisation could begin again.⁶⁷

Evolution on Earth began when lunar *pitris* (the evolved beings of the Lunar Chain) created the first root race by oozing them out of their own bodies.⁶⁸ The first root race was ethereal and Blavatsky called them “the self-born.”⁶⁹ They multiplied by “budding” and lived on a continent known as “The Imperishable Sacred Land.”⁷⁰ They were sexless and could not be injured or die. They gradually turned into their more solid descendants, the second root race, known as “the sweat born.” This second race was intellectually inactive, and was “constantly plunged in a kind of blank or abstract contemplation, as required by the conditions of the Yoga state.”⁷¹ Neither of the first two root races was solid enough to have left any physical remains. The “Hyperborean” continent on which the second race lived stretched southwards and westwards from the North Pole and comprised what is now northern Asia.⁷² Like the first root race, they were sexless, but since they were more material, they were affected by the physical conditions of the Earth.

The third root race was the first to develop physical bodies. Blavatsky called it the Lemurian race, because it lived on a continent named Lemuria, which used to occupy the Indian and Pacific Oceans before it sunk because of earthquakes and subterranean fires.⁷³ The first Lemurians reproduced by exuding drops of

racés. . . . It is a law which acts at its appointed time, and not at all blindly, as science may think, but in strict accordance and harmony with Karmic law” (Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 329).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 350.

⁶⁷ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 224–25.

⁶⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 160, 180 and *II*, 110, 174.

⁶⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 164.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6, 17–18, 132.

⁷¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 207.

⁷² Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 7, 116.

⁷³ Ibid., 266, 332–33. Sri-Lanka, Madagascar, Australia and Easter Island were its remains, Blavatsky claimed (Ibid. 7).

sweat that became eggs.⁷⁴ These eggs initially produced hermaphroditic beings, but very gradually they produced offspring in which one sex predominated over another. Eventually, male or female Lemurians were born.⁷⁵ At the close of the third root race, the Lemurians looked like gigantic apes, but they could already think and speak, and were relatively civilized.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, some of them were morally irresponsible and mated with lower animals, creating the remote ancestor of today's ape.⁷⁷ This, according to Blavatsky, was how occultists explained how apes evolved from “men,” and not the other way around, as the Darwinists claimed.⁷⁸ During the early Lemurian root race, higher beings had produced those who would eventually become human adepts by a process called *Kriyasakti*. These proto-adepts, known as the “Sons of Will and Yoga,” remained entirely apart from the rest of mankind.⁷⁹

At around the mid-point of the Lemurian root race, some Lemurians were endowed by higher beings with *manas*, or reason.⁸⁰ From then onwards, *manas* would continue to develop, and would eventually become “entirely divine.”⁸¹ Before they had been endowed with *manas*, the Lemurians had been sinless because they were without egos. They had therefore not created any karma.⁸² Their death and rebirth process had consequently been a lot less complicated than that of humans today; they would simply “resurrect” out of an old body and into a new one.⁸³ As soon as they were endowed with *manas*, however, they started creating karma and became subject to death and reincarnation in a recognisable form.⁸⁴

The fourth root race was the Atlantean. Their home was the continent of Atlantis, which rose out of the sea in the eastern Atlantic Ocean and was eventually submerged by a deluge.⁸⁵ The Atlanteans were more intellectual than the Lemurians and they perfected language.⁸⁶ During the highest point of its civilization, knowledge, and intellectuality, the Atlantean Race divided into those who followed the (good) right-hand path of knowledge, and those who

⁷⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁶ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 191 and *II*, 446.

⁷⁷ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 190.

⁷⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 180, 263, 635.

⁷⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 207.

⁸⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 244–45, 248, 275.

⁸¹ Ibid., 161–2.

⁸² Ibid., 410.

⁸³ Ibid., 610.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 8, 332–34.

⁸⁶ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 189.

followed the (evil) left-hand path.⁸⁷ The evolution of the Atlantean race led it down to the very bottom of materiality in its physical development.⁸⁸ They diminished in stature and the length of their lives decreased.⁸⁹ During the evolution of the Atlantean race, what had been “the holy mystery of procreation” gradually turned into animal indulgence. As a result, the Atlanteans changed physically and mentally. According to Blavatsky, from having been “the healthy King of animal creation of the Third Race, man became in the Fifth, our race, a helpless, scrofulous being and has now become the wealthiest heir on the globe to constitutional and hereditary diseases, the most consciously and intelligently bestial of all animals!”⁹⁰ The “curse of karma” was called down on the Atlanteans, Blavatsky wrote, not for seeking *natural* union, but for “abusing the creative power” and “wasting the life-essence for no purpose except bestial personal gratification.”⁹¹

Present day humanity, the fifth root race, was known as the Aryan, and it could trace its descent through the Atlanteans from those more spiritual races of the Lemurians.⁹² The Aryan race arose in Asia and spread south and west. It had been in existence for about one million years.⁹³ Blavatsky described the development of the Aryan race from the Atlantean as gradual and complex.⁹⁴ As with the emergence of all root races, there was some overlap, so that the remnants of the Atlanteans were still present at the dawn of the Aryan root race. Some of these remnants inhabited lands that eventually became islands, where “the undeveloped tribes and families of the Atlantean stock fell gradually into a still more abject and savage condition.”⁹⁵ After the submersion of the last remnant of the Atlantean race, “an impenetrable veil of secrecy was thrown over the occult and religious mysteries.” This secrecy led the Aryans to the establishment of the religious mysteries, “in which ancient truths might be taught to the coming generations under the veil of allegory and symbolism.”⁹⁶ Blavatsky considered the Aryan root race to be an evolutionary stage of pivotal importance since it was positioned at the exact mid-point of the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁸⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 446.

⁸⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 609 and *II*, 331.

⁹⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 411.

⁹¹ Ibid., 410.

⁹² Ibid., 318, 433, 444.

⁹³ Ibid., 435.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 433–35.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 743.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 124.

involutionary-evolutionary process.⁹⁷ Humanity had just “crossed the meridian point of the perfect adjustment of Spirit and Matter,” which represented the “equilibrium between brain intellect and Spiritual perception.”⁹⁸ A practical consequence of the turn towards spiritualisation was that phenomena such as thought transference, clairvoyance, and clairaudience would become more common.⁹⁹

The Aryan root race was to be followed by sixth and seventh root races in the future, and Blavatsky claimed the germs of the sixth were already to be found in America.¹⁰⁰ This sixth race, she claimed, would be “rapidly growing out of its bonds of matter, and even of flesh.”¹⁰¹ Once evolution had been completed through all the rounds and races of the planetary chain, the monad would “find itself as free from matter and all its qualities as it was in the beginning; having gained in addition the experience and wisdom, the fruition of all its personal lives, without their evil and temptations.”¹⁰² The monad would then become a *dhyān chohan*.¹⁰³ These *dhyān chohans* would be transferred, in the next cycle, to “higher, superior worlds, making room for a new hierarchy, composed of the elect ones of our mankind.”¹⁰⁴ Highly evolved *dhyān chohans* would move through solar systems in this way until the time arrived for the cosmic *pralaya*, when the entire cosmos would rest. At that point they would achieve “the highest condition of Nirvana.”¹⁰⁵

The *Saptaparna*

In Blavatsky’s later thought, the human microcosm reflected the septenary macrocosm, and each of the seven elements of the human constitution played an indispensable role in the death and rebirth process.¹⁰⁶ Known as the *saptaparna* (seven-leafed plant) these seven principles represented the balance

⁹⁷ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 182, 185–86.

⁹⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 300.

⁹⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 536–37.

¹⁰⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 444–45.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 446.

¹⁰² Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 180–81.

¹⁰³ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 159.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁵ H. P. Blavatsky, “Nirvana,” *The Theosophist* 5 (July 1884): 246.

¹⁰⁶ Blavatsky reconciled the earlier tripartite and the later septenary spiritual anthropologies by explaining that the seven could be condensed into three, or the three expanded into seven, with the two lowest principles forming the physical body, the next two forming the soul and the top three the spirit (Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 602–3).

of material and spiritual elements within the human being, or the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical levels on which a person was said to operate throughout their life.¹⁰⁷ The seven principles were given, in ascending order of spirituality, as the body (Sanskrit: *stula sarira*), vitality (*prana* or *jiva*), astral body (*linga sarira*), animal soul (*kama-rupa*), human soul (*manas*), spiritual soul (*buddhi*), and spirit (*atma*).¹⁰⁸ All seven of these principles were considered necessary for life.¹⁰⁹ In Blavatsky's later esoteric instructions she taught that each of these principles was itself sevenfold: there was an *atma* of the *kama-rupa*, a *buddhi* of the *kama-rupa* and so forth.¹¹⁰

The physical body (*stula sarira*) was composed of the lowest form of matter present in the human constitution. It was animated by *prana*, which Blavatsky described as “the breath of life,” or the active power producing all vital phenomena.¹¹¹ She also depicted the physical body as the vehicle (*upadhi*) of the life force. The third principle, the astral body or “astral double” was an ethereal duplicate of the physical body.¹¹² The matter of the physical body was formed and moulded over this astral body by the action of *prana*. The fourth principle, the animal soul, was the vehicle of the will and desire. It was associated with feelings and emotional consciousness and Blavatsky described it as “the subjective form created through mental and physical desires and thoughts in connection with things of matter, by all sentient beings.”¹¹³ Blavatsky considered the animal soul “the grossest of all our principles.” It was the “medium through which the beast in us acts all its life.” Hinting perhaps at the temptations of sexuality, she added, “every intellectual theosophist will

¹⁰⁷ “Do not imagine that because man is called septenary... he is a compound of seven... entities; or, as well expressed by a Theosophical writer, of skins to be peeled off like the skins of an onion. The ‘principles,’ as already said, save the body, the life, and the astral eidolon [lingha-sharira], all of which disperse at death, are simply aspects or states of consciousness” (Blavatsky, *Key*, 100).

¹⁰⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 153 and *II*, 593, 596.

¹⁰⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 158 and *II*, 241–42.

¹¹⁰ H. P. Blavatsky, “Esoteric Instruction Number Three” and “Esoteric Instruction Number Five,” in vol. 12 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), 648 and 693.

¹¹¹ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (Krotona: Theosophical Publishing House, 1918), 242; Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 593. This idea is, of course, is reminiscent of her claim that the seven root races each had seven sub-races.

¹¹² Blavatsky, *Theosophical Glossary*, 35; “Esoteric Instruction Number Two,” in vol. 12 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), 547; “Esoteric Instruction Number Five,” 704.

¹¹³ Blavatsky, *Theosophical Glossary*, 159.

understand my real meaning.”¹¹⁴ Just as the first principle was the vehicle of the second, the fourth was the vehicle of the fifth. Bestowed on humanity when it was incarnated as the Lemurian root race, the fifth principle, the “human soul” or *manas*, was associated with memory and reason. Blavatsky described it as the mind, intelligence, or consciousness assimilating and reflecting the two principles above it. It was what made a person an intelligent or moral being, distinguishing them from an animal.¹¹⁵ Blavatsky also described *manas* as the conception of self and associated it with “embodied consciousness” or the “higher ego.”¹¹⁶ Until the third root race, humanity had not possessed an animal soul sufficiently developed to be able to act as the vehicle of *manas*.¹¹⁷ Even among the Aryans, human *manas* was not fully developed, and only in the future would the full development of *manas* be achieved.¹¹⁸

Manas was crucial to Blavatsky’s account of reincarnation because the spiritual evolution of a person who had reached the Aryan race was said to depend on the ability of their *manas* to overcome the pull of the lower principles and attach itself to the higher ones.¹¹⁹ Blavatsky explained the process as follows: *Manas* was constituted of a higher and a lower part. The higher aspect was attracted to the principle above it, *buddhi*, but the lower aspect to the principles below it, the “animal soul full of selfish and sensual desires.”¹²⁰ Although *manas* was drawn down by these desires, if the “better man” or higher *manas* escaped that “fatal attraction,” then *buddhi* would conquer and carry *manas* with it “to the realm of eternal spirit.” This meant the higher *manas* and *buddhi* would join together and go on to the next incarnation in a more evolved state.¹²¹ Blavatsky wrote that the higher *manas* existed on the “plane of *Sutratma*, which is the golden thread on which, like beads, the various personalities of this higher *Ego* are strung.”¹²²

The two highest principles (*atma* and *buddhi*) formed the monad, the true, immortal essence of a person.¹²³ *Buddhi* was the “divine soul,” or the faculty

¹¹⁴ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 260.

¹¹⁵ Blavatsky, *Theosophical Glossary*, 188; *Key*, 92, 135–36.

¹¹⁶ Blavatsky, *Key*, 100, 174.

¹¹⁷ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 161–62.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 300–1.

¹¹⁹ Blavatsky, *Key*, 92.

¹²⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 495–96. In *The Key to Theosophy*, she explained that the “lower, or personal ego” referred to the “false personality,” the combination of the physical body, etheric double, and the lower self, including all the principles up to the lower part of *manas*. This false personality therefore indicated the animal instincts, passions and desires (*Key*, 176).

¹²¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 244–45.

¹²² Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 79.

¹²³ “Properly speaking, the term “human monad” applies only to the dual soul (*Atma–Buddhi*),

of cognising, the conscience, and the channel through which divine knowledge reached the ego, allowing discernment of good and evil.¹²⁴ In other words, through absorbing the higher part of *manas* in each incarnation, the person evolved and their *buddhi* would become increasingly conscious.¹²⁵ Blavatsky stated *buddhi* was the vehicle of the seventh principle. *Atma* was the “higher self;” a “ray” of the universal spirit inseparable from its divine source.¹²⁶ *Atma*, Blavatsky wrote, “Is neither your Spirit nor mine, but like sunlight shines on all. It is the universally diffused ‘divine principle,’ and is as inseparable from its one and absolute *Meta-Spirit*, as the sunbeam is inseparable from the sunlight.”¹²⁷ *Atma* was “the God above, more than within, us. Happy the man who succeeds in saturating his *inner Ego* with it!”¹²⁸

According to Blavatsky, it was the separation of the higher principles from the physical body that caused death. At death, the three lower principles (the physical body, the vitality, and the astral body) were cast off. The physical body decomposed, but the astral body could hang around for a while as a ghost and appear during séances. The four higher principles then entered *kama loka*, an astral locality where their experience depended on their level of spiritual achievement. (The more spiritual the person, the shorter their stay in *kama loka*.) At the end of the *kama loka* period, the fifth principle, *manas*, was purified and divided by a struggle between the principles above (*atma* and *buddhi*) and below it (the *kama-rupa* or emotional body). The three highest principles (*atma*, *buddhi*, and the higher part of *manas*) then entered a “spiritual ante-natal state,” preparing for the bliss of the realm of *devachan*, which would be entered having left behind the emotional body. *Devachan* closely paralleled Earth life, and within it, individuals were said to experience growth, maturity, and decline. There were an infinite variety of levels of wellbeing within *devachan* to suit different degrees of merit.¹²⁹ Blavatsky depicted it as a sort of heaven that provided a rest between lives just as sleep offered rest between days and as *pralayas* occurred between *manvantaras*. Blavatsky remarked on how this teaching reflected the life and death of a human being.

not to its highest spiritual vivifying Principle, *Atma*, alone. But since the Spiritual Soul, if divorced from the latter (*Atma*) could have no existence, no being, it has thus been called” (Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 178).

¹²⁴ Ibid., xix.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 244.

¹²⁶ Blavatsky, *Key*, 175; “Esoteric Instruction Number Three,” 648; “Esoteric Instruction Number Five,” 693; *Theosophical Glossary*, 40.

¹²⁷ Blavatsky, *Key*, 135.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 175.

¹²⁹ Blavatsky, “The Various States of *Devachan*,” *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, 5:90.

It thus becomes apparent how perfect is the analogy between the processes of Nature in the Kosmos and the individual man. The latter lives through his life-cycle, and dies. His “higher principles,” corresponding in the development of a planetary chain to the cycling Monads, pass into *Devachan*, which corresponds to the “Nirvana” and states of rest intervening between two chains. The Man’s lower “principles” are disintegrated in time and are used by Nature again for the formation of new human principles, and the same process takes place in the disintegration and formation of Worlds. Analogy is thus the surest guide to the comprehension of the Occult teachings.¹³⁰

As with *kama loka*, the length of time spent in *devachan* varied from individual to individual, but it was never less than one thousand years. It generally lasted around one thousand five hundred, but could be as long as three thousand years. Since the gap between human rebirths was so large, it was possible those alive in Blavatsky’s time were last incarnated as Atlanteans.¹³¹

After a long period in *devachan*, the monad — now composed of *atma*, *buddhi* and the higher part of *manas* — would feel the attraction of Earth life. Reincarnation was said to occur because of a thirst for life on the part of the monad. The monad then “descended,” acquiring a new set of lower principles, and the whole process would begin again. Although the principles themselves were considered new, Blavatsky said they were made of the same “life-atoms” that had formed the lower principles in previous incarnations. These atoms were once again drawn together by the returning individuality under the guidance of karmic law. Adding a scientific angle to this explanation, Blavatsky stated these life-atoms were partially transmitted from father to son by heredity.¹³²

Karma

Karma determined the details of the new life.¹³³ Blavatsky portrayed karma as an impersonal law of the universe, an “eternal and immutable decree,” that brought about harmony in the spirit–matter cosmos.¹³⁴

Karma creates nothing, nor does it design. It is man who plans and creates causes, and Karmic law adjusts the effects; which adjustment is not an act, but universal

¹³⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 173.

¹³¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 303.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 671–72.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹³⁴ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 643, and II, 303.

harmony, tending ever to resume its original position, like a bough, which, bent down too forcibly, rebounds with corresponding vigour. If it happen to dislocate the arm that tried to bend it out of its natural position, shall we say that it is the bough which broke our arm, or that our own folly has brought us to grief? ... KARMA is an Absolute and Eternal law in the World of manifestation.¹³⁵

Blavatsky saw karma as playing a role in the perfection of humanity.

Occultists...recognise in every pain and suffering but the necessary pangs of incessant procreation: a series of stages toward an ever-growing perfectibility, which is visible in the silent influence of never-erring Karma, or *abstract* nature — the Occultists, we say, view the great Mother otherwise. Woe to those who live without suffering. Stagnation and death is the future of all that vegetates without a change. And how can there be any change for the better without proportionate suffering during the preceding stage? Is it not those only who have learnt the deceptive value of earthly hopes and the illusive allurements of external nature who are destined to solve the great problems of life, pain, and death?¹³⁶

However, to reiterate, although it played a role in evolution, karma was not ubiquitous throughout Blavatsky's cosmos. Prior to the late Lemurian period, "humanity" had not experienced karma. Karma was, in fact, only a feature of one of the latest phases in human evolution, and was associated with intellectuality and the human ego.

As I claimed previously, Blavatsky's discussions of karmic reincarnation typically had the intention of vindicating divine justice by demonstrating life's apparent inequalities to be the results of individual or group karma.¹³⁷ Had there been no karmic reincarnation, wrote Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*, the origin and cause of suffering could not be accounted for.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 304–5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 475.

¹³⁷ Blavatsky argued that the "social evils" of the distinction between social classes, or the sexes, and the unequal distribution of capital and labour were due to karma, but that the particular conditions of life were not solely the result of individual action but also the result of group karma. Group karma was the aggregate of individual karma, so that the sum of the karma of everyone within a particular nation became national karma and the aggregate of all national karmas was world karma (*Key*, 203–05). The most important point for Blavatsky here was that the reality of karma didn't mean that people were entitled to ignore the suffering of others. For example, she argued it is every individual's responsibility to give what they can of their money, time, and "ennobling thought" in order to "balance" or improve the national karma (*Key*, 205).

¹³⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine I*, 183.

It is only the knowledge of the constant re-births of one and the same individuality throughout the life-cycle; the assurance that the same MONADS...rewarded or punished by such rebirth for the suffering endured or crimes committed in the former life;...it is only this doctrine, we say, 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 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 of 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.¹³⁹

Having looked at Blavatsky's ideas in some detail, we are now in a position to assess the place of reincarnation vis a vis karma. Karma had a role in Blavatsky's account of evolution, but only from around the middle of the Lemurian period onwards and alongside other evolutionary factors such as the assistance of higher beings and the inherent evolutionary impulse of the cosmos. The compound of *karmic reincarnation* was presented as accounting for inequality and human suffering, and was believed to offer an opportunity for self-perfection and hence accelerated evolution through the endurance of suffering. Furthermore, reincarnation in all its forms was depicted as a micro-cosmic reflection of the universe's macrocosmic cyclicity.

Conclusions

Presumably, Blavatsky found her later doctrine of reincarnation more appealing than the metempsychosis theory she had discarded around 1882. If one had adhered to the doctrines of *Isis Unveiled*, one wouldn't have expected to meet deceased loved ones at séances, since they would either have achieved immortality and transmigrated to the next sphere, or failed to do so and been annihilated. The latter outcome was considered the lot of the majority and it was not particularly comforting. Not so with reincarnation. In Blavatsky's later theory, one would still not expect to converse with the spirits of the dead (as Spiritualists claimed to), but one might be consoled by the idea of them (in

¹³⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 303–4. She made the same point in *Key*, 142.

all probability) enjoying their good karma in *devachan* and eventually returning to life on Earth in a more advanced human form. Nevertheless, Blavatsky's reincarnation doctrine still placed a greater distance between the living and the dead than did its main reincarnationist competitor, French Spiritism. Referring to timescales of geological magnitude in contrast to the shorter timescales of Spiritism, according to Blavatsky, reincarnation never occurred during the lifetimes of family members. As explained by Blavatsky's theory of the seven principles, it also always involved the birth of a completely different person from the one who had died. There was therefore no chance the new baby could be the reincarnation of the deceased grandparent, for example. Thus, Blavatsky deemphasized the personal in favour of an impersonal evolutionary trajectory whose ultimate destination was more important than the details of any particular life. To be sure, despite individual differences, all humans were ultimately alike in that their immortal element, *atma*, derived from — and would return to — the same source. All else was temporary and illusory, including earthly attachments. Blavatsky's reincarnation doctrine was, therefore, arguably quite democratic, and could be seen as supporting the notion of universal brotherhood that was promoted in Theosophy.

It could also be seen as pointing towards the inherent power of mankind and the fundamental importance of the present moment. As such, it reflected that *fin-de-siècle* apprehension — so common in the literature of the period — that a pivotal moment in history had been reached. For Blavatsky, human incarnation in the fifth (Aryan) root race of the fourth round of the Earth Chain was the critical juncture in the progression of the spirit–matter cosmos, the point of exact equilibration, after which the upward turn would once again begin. Sometimes, Blavatsky made it seem as though everything hinged on humanity's contemporary choices, a position consistent with an occultist emphasis on personal agency, power, and will. On the other hand, reincarnating monads could also be made to seem like twigs in a stream in that no matter what one did, humanity — and the cosmos — would inevitably evolve, karma or no karma. Karmic reincarnation played a supporting role in this evolutionary cosmic drama at the same time as it vindicated divine justice by explaining the meaning of suffering. Nirvana, Blavatsky argued, could only be reached through “æons of suffering” and by attaining “the *knowledge* of EVIL as well as of good, as otherwise the latter remains incomprehensible.”¹⁴⁰ The tension between the inherent progressive impulse of the cosmos and human agency was present here too, as it wasn't always clear whether Blavatsky was saying that suffering itself compelled evolution, or whether one's response to that suffering was the key to progress. One suspects both to have been the case.

¹⁴⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine II*, 81.

Bibliography

- Baier, Karl. "Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the *Cakras* in Early Theosophy." In *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, 309–54. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.
- Barker, A. T. ed. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*. London: T. F. Unwin, 1923.
- Bauduin, Tessel. "The Occult and the Visual Arts." In *The Occult World*, edited by Christopher Partridge, 429–45. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.
- Bender, Courtney. "American Reincarnations: What the Many Lives of Past Lives Tell us about Contemporary Spiritual Practice." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007), 589–614.
- Bergunder, Michael. "Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014), 398–426.
- Blavatsky, H. P. "Esoteric Instruction Number Two." In Vol. 12 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, edited by Boris de Zirkoff, 542–80. Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980.
- . "Esoteric Instruction Number Three." In Vol. 12 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, edited by Boris de Zirkoff, 581–652. Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980.
- . "Esoteric Instruction Number Five." In Vol. 12 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, edited by Boris de Zirkoff, 691–712. Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980.
- . *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. New York: J. W. Bouton, 1877.
- . "'Isis Unveiled' and 'The Theosophist' on Reincarnation." *The Theosophist* 3 (August 1882), 288–89.
- . "Nirvana." *The Theosophist* 5 (July 1884), 246.
- . *The Key to Theosophy*. London and New York: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1889.
- . "Theories about Reincarnation and Spirits." *The Path* 1 (November 1886), 232–45.
- . *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. 2 vols. 1888. Facsimile of the first edition. London: Theosophical University Press, 2014.
- . "Theosophy and Spiritism." In Vol. 5 of *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, edited by Boris de Zirkoff, 36–65. Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1940.
- . *The Theosophical Glossary*. Krotona: Theosophical Publishing House, 1918.
- Campbell, Bruce F. *Ancient Wisdom Revisited: A History of the Theosophical Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Chajes, Julie and Boaz Huss (eds.). *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.
- Chajes, Julie. *Recycled Lives: A History of Theosophical Reincarnation*. New York: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).
- . "Metempsychosis and Reincarnation in *Isis Unveiled*." *Theosophical History* 16 (2012), 128–50.
- Chrysidides, George D. "Defining the New Age." In *Handbook of the New Age*, edited by Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis, 5–24. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Ellwood, Robert S. "Obligatory Pilgrimage: Reincarnation in the Theosophical Tradition." In *Concepts of Transmigration: Perspectives on Reincarnation*, edited by Steven J. Kaplan, 189–202. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.
- . "The American Theosophical Synthesis." In *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, edited by Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, 111–34. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

- Ferentinou, Victoria. "Light From Within or Light From Above." In *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, 273–307. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.
- Godwin, Joscelyn. *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Godwin, Joscelyn, Christian Chanel, and John P. Deveney. *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Initiatic and Historical Documents of an Order of Practical Occultism*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995.
- Hammer, Olav. *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Hanes, W. Travis, Jr. "On the Origins of the Indian National Congress: A Case Study of Cross-Cultural Synthesis." *Journal of World History* 4 (1993), 69–98.
- Heelas, Paul. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Introvigne, Massimo. "Lawren Harris and the Theosophical Appropriation of Canadian Nationalism." In *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, 355–86. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.
- Kuzmin, Eugene. "Maximilian Voloshin and the Kabbalah." In *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, 167–95. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.
- Lev, Shimon. "Gandhi and His Jewish Theosophist Supporters in South Africa." In *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, 245–71. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.
- Lewis, James R. "Science and the New Age." In *Handbook of the New Age*, edited by Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis, 207–29. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- McMahan, David. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Neufeldt, Ronald. "In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement." In *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, edited by Ronald W. Neufeldt, 233–55. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.
- Prothero, Stephen. *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Tingay, Kevin. "Madame Blavatsky's Children: Theosophy and Its Heirs." In *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, edited by Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, 37–50. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.
- Zander, Helmut. *Anthroposophie in Deutschland. Theosophische Milieus und gesellschaftliche Praxis, 1884 bis 1945*. 2 vols. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007.
- . *Geschichte der Seelenwanderung in Europa*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999.
- . "Transformations of Anthroposophy from the Death of Rudolf Steiner to the Present Day." In *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, 387–410. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016.