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Julie Chajes. *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xii + 215. ISBN: 978-0-19-090913-0. $99.

From Victorian times to the present, the question of reincarnation in Helena P. Blavatsky's Theosophy—in particular, in what type of body or form of existence an individual might return to life after death—has occasioned fierce debate. Much of the controversy centers around a perceived shift in the portrayal of reincarnation between Blavatsky's first major work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), and her second, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

With *Recycled Lives,* Julie Chajes has produced about as helpful and concise a history of this debate as one could hope for. Upon this history she builds her own proposal for how to think about early and late Blavatskian reincarnation. It is high time for the publication of a complete work devoted to Blavatsky's scattered statements on reincarnation, including the changes in her teachings over time, and the social and theological imperatives that may have driven these shifts. Chajes successfully performs this task.

Reincarnation deals with the future of the soul and body, and is entwined with soteriology. In explaining Blavatsky on reincarnation, Chajes necessarily explores many facets of Theosophical thought. In fact, *Recycled Lives* could well serve as an introduction to Blavatsky's Theosophy for the uninitiated, written as it is in succinct and accessible prose, and referencing much recent scholarship. Particularly helpful are the chapters on spiritualism and science.

The development of Blavatsky's soteriology and her consistency about future lives (or lack thereof) is central to Chajes's work. She elaborates on a scholarly consensus that began to develop in the 1990s which argues that Blavatsky's teachings can be better understood through the lens of the politics of spiritualism, the milieu of many early Theosophists. However, spiritualism is not the only influence, and Chajes describes Blavatsky's mature reincarnation system as

a syncretic one, influenced by, among other sources, "Platonic and neo-Platonic accounts, diverse contemporary scientific theories of evolution, and modernizing interpretations of Hindu and Buddhist thought" (41).

In *Isis,* Blavatsky makes contradictory statements about reincarnation, either denying it or declaring it rare. However, she also promotes elements of a system that Wouter Hanegraaff has called "ascendant metempsychosis," or the reincarnation of worthy individuals in progressively more refined bodies on other worlds besides earth.[1] According to the *Isis* version of ascendant metempsychosis, only elite souls can survive death; the fate of most people is uncertain and does not necessarily include reincarnation on earth, but possibly in "lower" worlds.[2] In her 2012 treatment of this topic, Chajes refers to early Blavatskian reincarnation as "a specific version of ascendant metempsychosis," the "primary doctrine" of the *Isis* system, following Hanegraaff's use of the term to describe a progressive, evolutionary and elitist system that emerged in eighteenth-century Christian theosophy.[3] In *Recycled Lives,* Chajes no longer uses "ascendant" to modify "metempsychosis," but simply describes the same Theosophical formulation as "metempsychosis."

Chajes follows a proposal by John Patrick Deveney that Blavatsky's early system mirrors that of the nineteenth-century occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph.[4] Her association of the *Isis* system with Randolph, who came out of the milieu of American spiritualism, dovetails with the consensus that holds that Blavatsky initially rejected universal systems of reincarnation because they were repugnant to many spiritualists who were uncomfortable with the notion that

1. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 478.

2. See Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1960), 345–46.

3. Julie Chajes, "Metempsychosis and Reincarnation in Isis Unveiled," *Theosophical History* XVI, no. 3–4 (July–Oct. 2012): 128.

4. John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: Nineteenth-Century Spiritualist, Rosicrucian and Sex Magician* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 279–80.

humans might "regress" into animal forms. Among such spiritualists were the noted trance speaker Emma Hardinge Britten, a prominent founding member of the Theosophical Society. Scholars have noted that Blavatsky shifted her position on reincarnation only after other spiritualists who supported it, such as followers of Anna Kingsford and Alan Kardec, began to promote progressive schemes incorporating many lifetimes on earth.[5]

The shift began in 1882 when Blavatsky presented a more developed treatment of reincarnation as a universal system (not just for elite souls) via *The Theosophist*, a monthly journal she edited from the Theosophical Society's Indian headquarters. Blavatsky was immediately challenged by C. C. Massey, a prominent British Theosophist, to explain this apparent shift. Her responses—in 1882 and again in an 1886 article republished as an appendix to later editions of *Isis*—failed to convince many critics. She justified herself primarily by complexifying her anthropology such that the human was seen as having ever more bodies and layers of soul stuff.

At least some of the confusion around Blavatsky's teachings on reincarnation can be blamed on her rambling style and interchangeable employment of *reincarnation*, *metempsychosis* and *transmigration*, which do not have stable meanings in her work. She did, however, try for consistency in her 1889 *The Key to Theosophy*. Chajes's thesis is that "Blavatsky changed her mind about rebirth, tried to cover up the change, and failed" (185). Chajes supports her position with new evidence from Blavatsky's letters that favors ascendant metempsychosis as the primary system of *Isis* (56–61). In one letter, Blavatsky declares that immortality is not available to all, but "must be won" (60).

The recycling from which *Recycled Lives* takes its title occurs in the ascendant metempsychosis formulation when the less spiritual (i.e. the vast majority of humans) go through a sort of cosmic degaussing in which their individuality is erased and their soul stuff returned to a cosmic pool from which new souls

5. See Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994), 334–42; Jeffrey D. Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker, 2012), 130–43, 188–94; Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 464–73.

are continually being fashioned. As Chajes puts it, "the body and the soul of one who had failed to achieve immortality disintegrated. Its 'atoms' would be recycled back into the elements of physical nature and the 'atoms' of the soul would return to the 'more sublimated elements'" (60).

According to a social constructivist perspective of Blavatsky's theology, her early denial of an afterlife for most people also permitted her to elevate her teachings above séance communications by limiting the after-death existence of a personality. But her greater exposure to Hindu and Buddhist thought in India later led her to understand the importance of both karma and reincarnation in a well-rounded soteriology and theodicy.

But some Theosophists are not convinced that a shift took place or was motivated by social concerns. Pablo Sender, for example, argues in favor of a continuity in Blavatsky's teachings on reincarnation, though he acknowledges differences between early and late teachings.[6] The argument for continuity rests on the difficulties with interpreting *Isis*, which also confusingly provides exceptions to the recycling scenario and implies that all humans may approach perfection through cyclic transmigration. Chajes argues that despite the confusion over language, Blavatsky's dominant early position can be identified and labeled as *metempsychosis,* or the rebirth of elite souls on better planets accompanied by the "recycling" of all other souls, and distinguished from her later position, which Chajes calls *reincarnation*, the progressive perfection of most people through reincarnation on earth and other planets (65). But Chajes also adds that "Blavatsky's ideas were consistent, if not always perspicuous," and blames "terminology" for the confusion (63). She goes on to state that her own "detailed reading… makes sense of her [Blavatsky's] sometimes apparently contradictory statements" (64).

Although Chajes has achieved remarkable clarity concerning some of the murkier aspects of the debate, I do find her strategy of assigning *metempsychosis*

6. See Pablo D. Sender, "*Isis Unveiled* on Metempsychosis and Transmigration: A Reply to Julie Chajes' Paper," *Theosophical History* XVIII, no. 1–2 (January–April 2016): 11–23.

to the *Isis* system and *reincarnation* to the post-1882 system to be confusing. In *Recycled Lives,* Chajes has dropped her earlier association of "ascendant" with "metempsychosis" and simply argues that "metempsychosis was the main rebirth doctrine of *Isis Unveiled* and it was associated with the indestructibility of spirit and matter, progressive evolution, human effort, and cyclicity" (63). My concern is not that there is not evidence of two separate doctrines—there is—but that the use of *metempsychosis* and *reincarnation* to describe them implies both that the doctrines were complete formulations and that these terms have distinct stable meanings outside the Theosophical purview. In fact, metempsychosis and reincarnation have been used interchangeably in Western esotericism. Classical Greek versions of metempsychosis do incorporate human return to life on earth in both human and animal forms. Chajes's argument, while compelling, would have been easier to understand had she kept her 2012 formulation of Blavatsky's early system as "a specific version of ascendant metempsychosis," which would remind the reader of the elitist and progressive (not on earth, no return to animal form) bent of Blavatsky's early work.

In addition, while Chajes has provided a strong argument for the primacy of ascendant metempsychosis in Blavatsky's early period, she also identifies a variety of exceptions to this framing. Theosophists have also used these exceptions as proof of her consistency. The exceptions include Blavatsky's citation of other Hellenistic and Kabbalistic formulations that imply the appearance of human souls in a series of human lives on earth.[7]

My concerns over Chajes's terminology differ from those offered by Sender in 2016, who critiques Chajes by arguing that there actually is consistency between *Isis* and Blavatsky's later work, which can be seen in "a natural and gradual development of Blavatsky's presentation of the teachings."[8] Though he admits that Blavatsky "was generally not very systematic in the use of her terms,"

7. See Sender, "Reply to Chajes," 17.
8. Sender, "Reply to Chajes," 21.

he harmonizes through interpreting the *Isis* version as both "fragmentary" and allegorical, and viewing later renditions of her theology as more complete.[9] Although I am more skeptical about Blavatsky's consistency, I agree that *Isis* presents an embryonic theology, and that there are both continuities and discontinuities between her early and later work, a point which Chajes also accepts. "It would be a mistake to ignore either the continuities or the discontinuities at the expense of each other; both are there" (185). By applying a metempsychosis (early)/reincarnation (late) dichotomy to Blavatsky's thought, Chajes reifies a system that was, in fact, under development. I hope that Chajes's usage, if adopted, is clarified by those building on her work if only because a reified view may obscure the creative process. The construction of theology is neither always consistent nor clear, as demonstrated by the multiplicity of reincarnation concepts in later Theosophy and its offshoots.

Elsewhere, Chajes does provide a convincing demonstration of the social process of the construction of Theosophical soteriology. For example, she identifies additional reasons why ascendant metempsychosis failed to take hold and reincarnation was more attractive. She notes that the recycling version of human destiny, which implies that the dead could not be contacted and that spiritual progress for most people was unattainable, was elitist and uncomfortable. In contrast, reincarnation in the fully developed system of Theosophical soteriology was "consoling and democratic" and appealed to "middle class and well educated" audiences (187, 189). Here, Chajes provides additional foundation for developmentalist approaches to Blavatsky's work, which, of course, undermine Blavatsky's claim to have received these doctrines from an unchanging ancient tradition.

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9. Sender, "Reply to Chajes," 14, 20.