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Evolution Esotericized: Conceptual Blending and the Emergence of Secular, Therapeutic Salvation

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ABSTRACT

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The esoteric appropriation of evolution in the sense of self-improvement or personal transformation can be better understood by combining a historical approach with conceptual metaphor theory. The dissertation first evaluates the esoteric appropriation historically as a type of religious response to Darwin. It works backwards from the twentieth-century counterculture (as identified by Theodore Roszak in 1975), to show that esoteric “evolution” had its roots in the late nineteenth-century intersection of spiritualism, Theosophy, and psychical research, with particular emphasis on Hermetic traditions.

The historical analysis centers on a fine-grained evaluation of the evolutionary thought of Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, and a comparison of her system with that of Frederic W.H. Myers, an important contributor to both psychical research and early psychology. It evaluates their positions with regard to nineteenth-century spiritualism and debates about materialism within the scientific and religious communities, particularly as it related to the phenomena of spiritualism. It demonstrates that Blavatsky had at least an indirect influence on some components of Myers’s system through his acquaintance with the Theosophist A.P. Sinnett. The dissertation uses original archival work on the Myers papers. These insights are combined with fresh interpretations of the history of the Theosophical Society and the interactions of psychical
researchers, spiritualists, and the scientific community (including Alfred Russel Wallace, co-discoverer of evolution by natural selection). A primary area of focus is the rhetorical connection of evolution with evidence of psychic ability and the recovery of lost (vestigial) or potential talents.

The primary thesis of the dissertation is that, as demonstrated by Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory (particularly as it incorporates Fauconnier and Turner’s cognitive blending theory), esotericized evolution today, while it often presents itself as “scientific,” is an imaginative blend of elements from multiple domains, including religious salvation, spiritualist and esoteric forms of divinization, psychotherapy, nineteenth-century biology, and Asian religions filtered through a Western lens—all informed by reference to the great chain of being metaphor.

Though esotericized evolution owes something to each of these elements, it cannot be reduced to any of them, which is why it persists as a popular code word for modern (partially) secularized salvation and conceptions of therapy as salvation. Blending theory also explains why elements of these nineteenth-century systems were discarded as the concept was adapted in the twentieth century.
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It used to be asked whether man was akin to the ape or to the angel. I reply that the very fact of his kinship with the ape is proof presumptive of his kinship with the angel.

—Frederic W.H. Myers, 1903

1 Myers 1915 1:242, §628.
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parents, Mark and Elizabeth Prophet, started things off by their own interest in evolution and esotericism.
Introduction: Evolution—It’s Everywhere!

From sports drinks to clothing lines, it seems that evolution is everywhere in the twenty-first century. But how is it being used? What is it supposed to mean? As a branding strategy, the category or invocation of “evolution” conveys an unspecified or general sense of transformation, implying that humans have the power to change themselves and their species, often through the effort of will-power or imagination. This interpretation runs counter to the modern evolutionary synthesis developed in the 1940s, which combines Darwinism with genetics, and sees human evolution largely as a matter of random genetic mutation played out via natural selection over millions of years.

And yet the use of the term evolution to imply the ability to transform one’s own life persists. It implies a process in which one can choose to participate, even more so when one steps outside the realm of branding and into the self-help, spiritual but not religious, and New Age sensibilities. There we find evolution employed as a way of encouraging humans to consciously change themselves, into what is not quite clear—sometimes enhanced humans with godlike powers, or even into “star people.” One New Age book distributor publishes a magazine entitled in the imperative: Evolve! It promotes titles on brain stimulation, meditation, and various therapeutic modalities, along with consciousness raising, near-death experiences, and mediumship. It even explains emotional reactions and longevity by appropriating the contemporary scientific term epigenetics, a word repurposed in 1942 to denote change caused by factors external to genetic structure—anything from environmental conditions to family history.¹

¹ See Sloan 2015, 4–5; Jablonka and Lamb 2010.
But when one probes more deeply into these uses of *evolution* to describe humans transforming themselves, the picture begins to blur. Is there an ultimate purpose or end to the transformation, a final divine template we are imagined as striving towards? Or are we envisioned as making up the future as we go? Are the answers in the mythical past or forward—on other planets, perhaps? Will we have help from higher intelligences or extraterrestrials? And what about the techniques being applied in transformation? Are they new or old? Shamanistic or technological?

The use of *evolution* to describe active human transformation, either at an individual or a species level, however bizarre it may sound to the scientifically inclined today, is not new, and has developed and transformed in tandem with and often in opposition to or subversion of the development of biological knowledge and scientific narratives about evolution. This dissertation explores some of these responses, which arose in the interstitial space between science, religion, and esotericism during the nineteenth century, after the 1859 publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*.

I approach this topic with several fundamental questions in mind. How did the notion of evolution become tied up with spiritual practice and the appearance or development of occult powers such as telepathy and healing? How did a scientific principle that was at its inception connected with “progress” and human improvement become connected with ideas of regressing in pursuit of ancient lost talents or returning to a divine source? Was it possible to characterize these evolutionary systems as forward- or backward-looking? Or both? Was the term *evolution* coopted by religious systems and equated with salvation? If so, how did the different forms of this evolutionary salvation differ from the orthodox models of Christian salvation? It was to answer these questions
that I began my research.

My initial approach was to apply a historical methodology, setting the ideas in context and examining the philosophical influences of the major thinkers in this intellectual lineage. Although context clarified much of the picture, I found additional insight in the cognitive science of religion, and in particular conceptual metaphor theory, which arose from linguistics. Conceptual metaphor theory suggests that cultural change is catalyzed when conflicting ideas collide and transform in the mind and imagination, and by individual thinkers interacting with the public imagination of a community or culture. These theories were first organized by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson as conceptual metaphor theory in 1980, and later supplemented with theories of cognitive blending by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. 2 Blending theory and metaphor theory can help explain how the contradictory concepts of “soul” and “evolution” were successfully combined in certain modern subcultures, particularly the popular “spiritual” scene, despite a general lack of agreement on specifics, as well as a patchy engagement with the topic of sexual reproduction. 3 As Fauconnier and Turner write, “blending routinely and inevitably extends the uses of words.” 4 Their methodology is discussed in detail below.

*My central thesis is that esotericized evolution today is an imaginative blend of elements from multiple domains, including religious salvation, esoteric divinization,*

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3 Sexual reproduction, which is crucial to evolution by natural selection, is often disparaged in these systems, particularly the nineteenth-century systems I study here, as a necessary evil that will ultimately be transcended by future humans. More recent systems take a more positive view of sexuality and the role of reproduction in evolution, but also highlight the transformative powers of individual erotic experience. Alien abduction literature does a little of both, suggesting physical encounters for the purpose of genetic engineering of the species, while also portraying an eroticized or terrifying encounter that leads to some kind of mental or spiritual transformation (see Kripal 2011).

4 2002, 276.
biology, and psychotherapy, informed by reference to the great chain of being metaphor. Though it owes something to each of these elements, it cannot be reduced to any of them, which is why it persists as a popular code word for modern, (partially) secularized salvation. In short, it is a minimally confrontational way of incorporating aspects of religious salvation into modern secular parlance. Most of this dissertation is devoted to responses to Darwin in the late nineteenth century, a time of shifting boundaries that gave birth to modern-day evolutionary esotericisms.

**Evolution and Religion—Third Way Approaches**

Most people are familiar with the battles between science and religion over the topic of evolution, particularly the debates between Darwinians and Anglican clergymen, and the fundamentalist Christian opposition to the teaching of natural selection in the United States, resulting in the 1925 Scopes “monkey trial.” Modern-day versions of these debates have played out over theories of intelligent design and the teaching of natural selection in schools—largely waged by diehard fundamentalists reluctant to give up a literal interpretation of the Bible. Churches that have accommodated Darwin—for example, the eventual toleration by the Catholic church of natural selection during the twentieth century, while still asserting divine purpose—usually receive less attention.⁵

But what is often overlooked entirely in the narrative are the thinkers who agreed with Darwin that the human body had evolved from animals, but sought to preserve human agency in the transformation of the species, usually through the development of human talents or spiritual discipline (and also often at least in the nineteenth century

⁵ See O’Callaghan 2015.
sought to preserve human uniqueness from animals). These I call esoteric responses to Darwin and, following Jeffrey Kripal’s language, *evolutionary esotericisms*. (Note also that the term *evolutionism* is often applied to describe particular scientific and religious views of the process of the transformation of life, and may also be seen in this work.)

The term *esoteric* will be defined in detail below but for the time being, it is enough to think of these esoteric approaches as promoting a third way, which adopts and even subverts scientific concepts, but also rejects or transforms traditional religious answers. Esotericism has a variety of meanings, but in the context of this dissertation it refers to *knowledge that has been rejected by the dominant religious, political, or scientific authorities concerning human acquisition of divine powers and transformation into divinity*. I discuss the academic roots of this definition in more detail below. Ideas about divinization are prominent in esoteric responses to Darwin, which can be distinguished from standard religious responses in that they place more agency in the individual. Transmutation of humans into a divine form is something to be accomplished or achieved rather than bestowed, though divine assistance remains in the equation.

Modern evolutionary esotericisms are rooted in Renaissance humanism as well as earlier traditions that emphasized human divinization, such as Neoplatonism and Hermetic traditions. Some of these are heterodox in that they view Christ’s resurrected body as a template for human futures—for example, in the eighteenth century, Emanuel Swedenborg imagined a post-resurrection future for humans on other planets. Esoteric templates for a future existence incorporate religious themes and attempt to make them plausible in light of current scientific and technological developments. It is not surprising, then, that Darwin’s theory of evolution inspired new variations on these visions, some of
which sound ridiculous today. Nevertheless, these esotericisms can tell us a great deal about how the religious imagination transforms theology.

I grew up in a New Age community where people practiced various therapeutic and transformational modalities under the rubric of “soul evolution.” This gave me an inside look at these belief systems and an interest in understanding how they developed, along with a critical eye that sees their inherent inconsistencies and overreach. I also have a historian’s interest in tracking how they have been reshaped over time, and the ways they continue to influence contemporary spiritual belief.

**Summary of Academic Work on Esotericized Evolution**

Theodore Roszak, a historian and coiner of the term *counterculture*, was one of the first to attempt a typology of what he termed “metaphysical evolutionism.” He subsumed a wide variety of evolutionary systems into an “Aquarian Frontier” and described the systems as united by their expansion of evolution out of biology. They “do not simply accept the idea of evolution as received from the biologists; rather, they insist upon extending the idea to include the mind, the soul, and the entire universe.”

Roszak’s 1975 *Unfinished Animal* is a problematic work of history, in that it is flawed by its perennialism and acceptance of the existence of a universal ancient wisdom religion. Nevertheless, it serves as a snapshot of the zeitgeist and an attempt at a prescription against modern-day ills. It presents a backwards-looking system of “evolution” embedded in what Roszak calls a “radical traditionalism that uses the old

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6 See Prophet 2009.
gnosis as sage’s scale and warrior’s sword against the aggression of the technocratic orthodoxies.”\textsuperscript{8} The roadmap to forward evolution, he asserts, is in the past. Roszak links evolution with a “Hidden Wisdom” tradition and Renaissance humanist visions in a teleological manner, and declares that evolution is the mechanism of the “destined completion of human nature.”\textsuperscript{9} I use Roszak’s typology to identify key components of modern esoteric evolutionism in support of my conceptual metaphor theory analysis.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, one of the founders of the academic study of esotericism, has done the most extensive work to date on esotericized evolution, identifying it as an essential aspect of New Age thought. He views the New Age as “secularized esotericism,” which reinterprets “esoteric tenets from secularized perspectives,” and incorporates evolution as a “fundamental component.”\textsuperscript{10} He argues that at least beginning in the eighteenth century, both the scientific worldview and the study of religions “were strongly informed by a belief in evolution and its close cognate, progress…. Evolutionism understood as historical progress is found neither in traditional esotericism, nor in the Oriental religions which were assimilated by Romanticism and occultism; but before the century was over, this occidental innovation had been assimilated so profoundly that it could seem as though it had never been absent.”\textsuperscript{11}

He identifies the sources of the historical progress variety of “evolutionism” as Romantic philosophies developed by German idealists such as Schelling and Hegel converging “with scientific developments in cosmology, embryology and geology.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{8} 1975, 83.
\textsuperscript{9} 1975, 76.
\textsuperscript{10} 1998, 520.
\textsuperscript{11} 1998, 462–63.
\textsuperscript{12} 1998, 465.
This dissertation checks the fit of Hanegraaff’s theory with a selected group of systems. Although it reviews some of the same systems studied by Hanegraaff, it also includes some that fall outside his data set, which was focused specifically on the New Age movement of the late twentieth century (roughly from 1975 forward). Hanegraaff identifies “evolutionism” as the third of five basic elements constitutive of New Age religion, which are: (1) this-worldliness (weak) (2) holism (3) evolutionism (4) the psychologization of religion and the sacralization of psychology and (5) expectations of a coming New Age. These are a “rough and preliminary orientation.” However, evolutionism in the New Age is not uniform. As Hanegraaff notes, “although New Agers share a belief in ‘evolution,’ they have different ideas about what it is, how it works and where it is going.”

Hanegraaff also sets out a “general analytic framework,” an “etic construct proposed as an ordering principle” for types of evolutionism, based on an opposition between closed and open systems, and between cyclical or linear processes. In a closed system, such as Earth’s biosphere or the solar system, it is assumed that the system is a self-sufficient unit, and that it progresses towards a fixed pre-existing goal. In an open system, the system itself is evolving and may turn into something different. A linear system is contrasted with a cyclical or spiral system, in which an end point is some version of a beginning point, but at a higher level. The four options available in this typology are: in a closed system, a teleological spiral or teleological linearity; and in an open system, an open-ended spiral and open-ended linearity.

The teleological systems suggest that humans are either destined to be

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14 1998, 159.
transformed by returning to a fixed starting point, or “advancing” to a pre-ordained state of godhood. Open-ended systems insist only on free will and progress towards greater complexity. Both types of systems may view progress as being achieved through a range of methods: moral and ethical restraint, mental and physical discipline, the cultivation of “talents” such as telepathy and psychic ability, and application of therapeutic interventions. Or they may view progress as something that happens inevitably, without conscious human participation.

Like Hanegraaff, Olav Hammer also evaluates New Age evolutionary systems, only in his case focusing on those that build upon Theosophy as developed by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) through the Theosophical Society. Contrasting them with religious responses to Darwin, which focused on an attempt to preserve a creator deity, Hammer argues that these Theosophical systems rather focus on “the need to defend the teleological, non-mechanistic aspect of their respective versions of evolutionism.”

Although Blavatsky engaged directly with Darwin, she did so piecemeal, as part of an attempt to demonstrate a basic harmony between esotericism and science, and did not engage his complete thought. After reviewing these systems, Hammer concludes that the evolutionary esoteric systems that emerged after Blavatsky, despite their adoption of “evolutionary” language, avoid engagement with Darwinism. I have chosen to focus on two primary figures, Blavatsky and Frederic W.H. Myers (1843-1901), Victorian philosopher, psychological theorist, and psychical researcher.

The influence of Myers on contemporary esotericism has been explored by Jeffrey Kripal, who has also tracked his influence on later thinkers such as Michael

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15 2004, 256.
Murphy (1930-), co-founder of the Esalen retreat center in northern California. The link between Myers and Murphy is in the exploration of the “supernormal,” a term Myers coined in the 1880s to refer to extraordinary human talents that are taken to be harbingers of future evolutionary human potential. What Kripal terms Murphy’s “evolutionary panentheism” was inspired by the syncretistic vision of the Western-educated Indian spiritual teacher Sri Aurobindo.\textsuperscript{16}

Kripal interrogates the relationship between mind and matter in these systems, particularly as it has changed during their twentieth-century interaction with the human potential movement and incorporation of the language of quantum physics and modern mathematics, forming what he calls “paraphysical esotericisms,” one of three categories that also include “evolutionary” and “extraterrestrial” esotericisms.\textsuperscript{17} Kripal also proposes a typology of evolutionary esotericisms centered on their perceived source: esotericisms of contact, of advance, and of thought. Esotericisms of contact involve encounters with “an intelligent ‘highly evolved’ force or presence in the environment.” Esotericisms of advance are theoretical visions of species advance, and esotericisms of thought are theoretical or intellectual systems that do not presume either contact or advance. These types may overlap.\textsuperscript{18} Kripal also distinguishes between individual and species models of evolutionary esotericism and engages the use of some of these ideas to support racist, colonial and fascist projects. Such associations are in fact historically accurate but, as Kripal points out, “they are partial,” as demonstrated by the involvement of some of the figures in our narrative in progressive causes such as women’s education.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Kripal 2007, 419.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Kripal 2017a, 179.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} See Kripal 2017a, 175–76.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} See Kripal 2017a, 278–79, 296–307.
\end{itemize}
I chose to focus on the two primary figures of Blavatsky and Myers because, as I read the later Myers, I was struck by similarities with Blavatsky. And yet I knew that Myers had broken with Blavatsky in 1884 and that a report by a member of the society to which he belonged, the Society for Psychical Research, had denounced her as a fraud. Yet some of her ideas, certainly transformed, were showing up in his work as truisms. What was the connection?

I decided early on that a link was Alfred P. Sinnett, who was friendly with both. But I was not prepared for the deep connections of both thinkers in philosophical reframings of spiritualism, and their indebtedness to a lesser-known figure of Victorian spiritualism, Emma Hardinge Britten, connected by, of all people, Alfred Russel Wallace, a world-renowned scientist and co-discoverer with Darwin of the theory of natural selection. How did these ideas develop and become transformed in the mudpots of Victorian intellectual ferment over Darwinian evolution? Why did certain esoteric interpretations crawl up out of the mudpots, develop legs, and influence twentieth-century culture, while others remained beneath the surface, consigned to oblivion? This dissertation looks for deeper insight into some of these esotericisms by examining their birthplace primarily in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States.

*Roszak’s 1975 Typology of Evolutionary Esotericism*

The progressive sentiment is embodied in Roszak’s 1975 typology of evolutionary esotericism. The narrative around progress was originally attached both to Darwinism and esotericism for different reasons but has in recent years become separated. Hanegraaff suggests that evolutionary visions responding to Darwin are not actually theories about the nature of reality, but theories developed “to account for the prior
feeling that present reality cannot be finished, complete or perfect and that the future must hold the promise of successive improvements.”

Eight components emerge from Roszak’s progressive typology, or “significant new sensibility,” as he calls it in Unfinished Animal, a “contemporary myth still in the making,” which I take as a starting point in my historical and cognitive linguistic evaluation of modern evolutionary esotericisms. It is worth noting that of the 145 systems and groups listed by Roszak in his “Aquarian Frontier,” just five have overt roots in Blavatsky’s thought. Yet his descriptions of evolutionary thought draw heavily on Theosophical language and directly quotes Blavatsky as a source. Nevertheless, clearly many influences fed into Roszak’s typology, and this dissertation evaluates only a portion of those influences. I summarize and rephrase each element of the typology in italics to clothe it in more generic language for easier evaluation:

1) Darwin was correct that we have evolved by natural selection, but that describes only our material evolution. According to the “Hidden Wisdom tradition,” a simultaneous double evolution of body and consciousness took place. Darwinian natural selection explains the evolution of human bodies from animals but does not entirely explain the evolution of human spiritual and mental activity as both consciousness and culture.

2) So-called “Lamarckian,” or “Neo-Lamarckian,” intentional or directed evolution is preferred to neo-Darwinian randomness. In spite of natural selection, humans have the power to direct the evolution of their species through transforming mind and culture.

3) Humans are “the unfinished animal, charged with a task of self-perfection.” As nature’s “uniquely self-creating, self-defining species,” we have the “task…to discover the godlikeness in whose image we are said to have been cast.” We were created in the image of a god we are called upon to imitate.

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20 1998, 159.
21 Roszak 1975, 3, 75.
22 1975, 118.
23 1975, 99, 103.
24 1975, 84, 5.
4) “The way forward is inevitably the way inward.” The “Aquarian Age” is more than a social revolution, it “demands a regeneration of life at some finer, more vibrant level of being, a qualitative great leap forward of the species whose outcome we can only fantastically prefigure.” 25 We can take control of our own evolution through changing our minds. “The way forward is...the way inward.” 26

5) Psychic powers such as “third-eye” vision, levitation, and UFO visits are “all rudimentary images of collective self-transcendence.” Exploring these powers is “a crucial stage in the evolution of the human race.” 27 Unusual powers of mind are developed from rudimentary past talents and will one day be possessed by all as humans “evolve.”

6) “Spiritual intelligence” is required to navigate the “lethal swamp of paranormal entertainments, facile therapeutic tricks, authoritarian guru trips, demonic subversions.” It can only be found in “sacred tradition,” the “secret doctrine” or “perennial wisdom.” 28 The few, the elite sages of the past have hidden secrets within our culture that provide meaning in a nihilistic world. Scientific theories of evolution spring from ancient emanationist ideas about the origins of life. The key to our future transformation lies in the past—we must go backwards to traditional and “perennial” wisdom to go forwards. We can get help from “advanced” formerly human beings.

7) Sex is a “physical expression of transcendence, an early approximation in our lives of a higher goal—the experienced unity of metaphysical polarities.” 29 The erotic points the way to transcendence.

8) The way forward is also “the way inward.” And “[t]ransformation of human personality in progress which is of evolutionary proportions, a shift of consciousness fully as epoch-making as the appearance of speech or of the tool-making talents in our cultural repertory.” 30 The next stage of human evolution requires conscious transformation of the personality.

9) Therapeutic practices such as mental healing, hypnosis, and psychotherapy
will advance the course of evolution.\textsuperscript{31} Religion and therapy are one. \textit{Healing promotes evolution, and salvation is therapy.}

10) In the future, all exclusive claims to truth...will be doomed by their own embarrassing arrogance.”\textsuperscript{32} Exclusive truth claims are impossible and experience is the barometer of truth.

It will become apparent as we review the history of evolutionary esotericisms that eight of these ten principles of so-called spiritual evolution can be identified in the immediate post-Darwin period, and that they represent a retooling of esoteric ideas about human destiny. Although Roszak was the first to admit that these principles are not static, and they have certainly changed since Roszak’s day, they still form the kernel today of the notion of spiritual “evolution.”

In Hanegraaff’s typology, Roszak’s evolution could be categorized as an open-ended spiral, as discussed later. The open-ended spiral became the dominant typology in the New Age movement of the 1980s, evaluated by Hanegraaff.\textsuperscript{33} Other typologies were influential, such as that described in the channeled work of Jane Roberts (1929-1984), who claimed to be writing on behalf of an advanced being known as Seth, or Marilyn Ferguson’s 1980 book \textit{The Aquarian Conspiracy}, which draws from the psychotherapist Ilya Prigogine, the quantum physicist David Bohm, and ideas based on the Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s “Omega Point.”\textsuperscript{34} But the themes identified in Roszak’s typology seem to have more sticking power in connection with the term \textit{evolution}, which may be explained in part by conceptual metaphor theory.

Although Roszak suggested that this picture of evolution originates with Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, there are in fact important aspects of her

\textsuperscript{31} 1975, 239.
\textsuperscript{32} 1975, 248.
\textsuperscript{33} See Hanegraaff 1998.
\textsuperscript{34} See Hanegraaff 1998, 158–68.
system that were not carried into the modern version described by Roszak, and there are important aspects of his version that do not come from Blavatsky. Evaluating these individual elements and how they came to be combined in a particular way in Roszak’s 1975 typology will shed light on the process of the creation of new religious concepts.

The ten-fold typology of spiritual evolution identified by Roszak is more than simply the rehashing of old esoteric beliefs. It leaves more room for human agency and provides a weaker teleology than earlier versions. By incorporating elements of biology and mapping them onto esoteric and religious concepts, it has enriched notions of salvation while also providing a template for critiquing and transforming esoteric traditions. It has persisted in a more-or-less coherent form, despite its contradictions and antagonism to materialist science, because it found a purchase in the science-inflected secular mind, in spite of its incompatibility with scientific Darwinism. Though its future in the twenty-first century remains unclear, it was cohesive and popular in certain circles for much of the twentieth century.

In spite of their inherent contradictions, modern evolutionary esotericisms have been accepted as reasonable by generations of religious thinkers, whether they consider themselves secular, “spiritual,” or religious. I have turned to Fauconnier and Turner’s theories about conceptual blending, which examine how disparate and conflicting ideas, like “computer” and “virus” are combined in the imagination to create a new and powerful concept. I will discuss blending theory in more detail in the methodology section below, as well as in chapter 8. These theories go a long way towards explaining the process by which this vision was created, beginning in the nineteenth century, as explored in the body of the dissertation.
Changing Scientific Views on Evolution—Three Periods

In order to understand how esoteric thinkers engaged with Darwinian ideas, it is important to understand how Darwinism has changed over time. The main period evaluated in this dissertation is the immediately post-Darwin (1859-1900) period. However, reference is also made to the early twentieth century (1900-1950s), and later twentieth century (1950-2000). These three periods correspond roughly to (1) “Darwinism” as presented by Darwin and his contemporary promoters like Thomas Henry Huxley; (2) the emergence of genetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and (3) the modern evolutionary synthesis incorporating a discourse of genetic heredity as an information system, particularly after the identification of the molecular structure of DNA in 1953, which has in the twenty-first century begun to give way to a more contextual and systems-oriented approach. Each paradigm is summarized below and in greater detail in the related chapters.

Darwin and Contemporaries (1859-1900)

Late nineteenth-century thought about evolution was confused, with many challenges to Darwinian natural selection, and it is important not to read back the twentieth-century synthesis into Darwin, who himself incorporated ideas about human progress from the respected Victorian philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). John Greene points out that Darwin “held views of nature, man, God, history, and social progress that were remarkably like those of Spencer and derived from similar sources.”\(^{35}\) Progress was an important component of Darwinian thought during the nineteenth century. For example,

\(^{35}\) 1981, 136.
T.H. Huxley, a systematizer and popularizer of Darwin’s thought during his lifetime, imagined that the “long progress through the Past” provided a “reasonable ground of faith in [the] attainment of a nobler Future.”

According to Greene, the nineteenth-century system of thought identified as Spencerianism could also be called Darwinism and was accepted by Darwin, Spencer, and T.H. Huxley. As of 1860, it consisted of:

(1) a unitary conception of nature-history as a law-bound system of matter in motion undergoing continual progress or evolution from homogeneity toward heterogeneity, (2) evolutionary deism eventuating in agnosticism under the influence of positivistic conceptions of the sources of human knowledge, (3) a naturalistic conception of man and human history as the latest productions of the system of nature, (4) belief in competitive struggle and the inheritance of functionally and environmentally produced modifications as the chief mechanisms of progress in organic and social evolution, (5) positivistic faith in the methods of natural science as man’s chief reliance in attaining knowledge of reality.

Many of the esoteric and religious responses to Darwin were in fact responses to this complex of ideas and not simply to his theory of natural selection. Darwin himself transitioned from deism to agnosticism over the course of his career, and esotericists who attempted to come to terms with his theories struggled to craft a coherent response. In

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36 1863, 111.
37 1981, 135.
addition, they were molded by other influences, such as Robert Chambers’s 1844
*Vestiges of the History of Natural Creation*, a popular work that postulated continuous
development of humans from animals, with progress towards an ever-higher state. Pre-
Darwinian naturalistic ideas of human transformation will be explored in Chapter 2.

It is also important to note Darwin’s acceptance of the notion that cultural
adaptations and the conditions of life could be inherited. Although he stated a general
opposition to such theories, which are often today referenced by the term *Lamarckism*, he
did not see natural selection as the sole cause of change in species, but was open to
inheritance of mental and moral training. During Darwin’s lifetime, numerous challenges
to his theories were mounted, especially since he was unable to identify a cause of
variation in species, leaving widespread skepticism about the mechanism of natural
selection. This inability opened the door for continued development of Lamarckism and
other explanations. Thus a heavy Lamarckian influence persists in the thought of both
Blavatsky and her followers as well as Myers.

*Early Twentieth Century (1900-1950s)*

Mendel’s work on heredity, although completed during the nineteenth century, did not
come to widespread notice until 1900 and was not applied to Darwin’s selection theory
until the 1920s. It led to the notion of variation through random mutation. But debate
about the inheritance of acquired characteristics, or Neo-Lamarckism, raged through the
1920s. Popular forms of Lamarckism energized progressive social movements and
inspired eugenic theories. An optimistic form of Lamarckism focusing on active human
participation in evolution and the application of biological evolution to cultural progress
took shape in the United States during the 1920s under the influence of the religious
paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope.\textsuperscript{38} By the 1930s, a synthesis of Darwinism and genetics had been crafted. The new synthesis was not widely known until mid-century, aided by the publication of Julian Huxley’s \textit{Evolution: The Modern Synthesis}, in 1942.

\textit{Later Twentieth Century (1950s-2000)}

Lamarckian and progressive interpretations were undermined by developments during the 1950s. First, evidence from ancient hominid fossils supported the conclusion that human evolution was branching, not linear, with dead-ends, rather than a triumphal sequence envisioned by advocates of progress. Second, the discovery of DNA (the molecularization of genetics) both gave support to genetic determinism and cemented the modern evolutionary synthesis. It also brought a new language into discussion of human destiny, with metaphors derived from computing and information technology.\textsuperscript{39}

However, influenced by the “evolutionary humanism” of Julian Huxley, optimistic templates based on transformation of culture, systems, and consciousness were also proposed by reputable scientists. Although Neo-Lamarckism had been discredited, various theories about the inheritance of culturally and socially acquired characteristics survived, as will be discussed below under definitions of evolution. By the end of the twentieth century, many biologists had begun to reject hard genetic determinism, i.e., direct correlation of genotype to behavior, in favor of more systems-oriented and holistic approaches.\textsuperscript{40} In this they echoed some esoteric as well as scientific theorists who had resisted genetic determinism beginning in the 1970s.

\textsuperscript{38} Bowler 1984, 280–82.
\textsuperscript{39} Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 2012, 184–86.
\textsuperscript{40} See also Maheu and Macdonald 2011.
Today, ideas about the inheritance of acquired characteristics are enjoying some reconsideration through work on epigenetics. This trend is traced by Steffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger in their *Cultural History of Heredity*. They point out that the “gene has lost pride of place in contemporary biology,” and that just as the human genome was successfully sequenced, “a language of postgenomics and epigenetics took over.”

Such systemic theories preserve the possibility that cultural practices and individual habits can influence the expression of genes. This notion is crucial to the evolutionary esotericisms that emphasize the adoption of therapeutic practices and disciplines.

**Definitions of Terms**

Key concepts, including *determinism, esotericism, evolution, progress, posthumanism, psychic talents, teleology, and transhumanism* are explored briefly below and in more detail as the discussion continues in each chapter.

**Determinism: Theological and Genetic as Related to Discussions of Evolution**

In the twentieth century, the theory of evolution was linked with genetic determinism, i.e., the position that human character and health are written in the genes. Genetic determinism is a subset of scientific determinism, which is related to physical determinism, one of five major forms of determinism identified by Richard Taylor. The other types are ethical, logical, theological, and psychological determinism, and touch on

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42 See Taylor 2006.
issues relevant to both science and religion as discussed in this project. A few words on each are in order here.

Evolution by way of natural selection can be seen as antithetical to logical and theological determinism since change is based on the interaction of random mutation with environmental conditions. Its impalatability to religious thinkers lies in its removal of the possibility that the world has a divinely ordained purpose or goal. As Peter Bowler has remarked, “Philosophers such as John Dewey and William James have pointed out…that Darwinism can be interpreted to encourage freedom, precisely because it does not predict a goal toward which nature and man must inevitably progress.” Evolution has been seen as a liberation from theological determinism, since it removes the possibility of any pattern to human destiny. However, some of the evolutionary esotericisms studied here are closely linked to theological and ethical determinism, and their proposals can be seen as novel attempts to resolve some of the innate tensions of deterministic modes of thought, which have all struggled to explain human action.

In classical Greek philosophy, ethical determinism proposed by Socrates and Plato held that humans are free insofar as they can make either rational or irrational choices. Rational choices were seen as leading inevitably to good, and irrational choices to evil and enslavement to the passions. Ethical determinism can be seen, then, as the inevitability of the choice of the good. However, Aristotle pointed out that desire often conflicts with reason and highlighted the tension between will or desire and reason, which was central to the later Neoplatonic and gnostic systems that influenced modern evolutionary esotericisms. The Neoplatonic systems can be seen as highly deterministic

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43 Bowler 1984, 348.
because for teachers such as Plotinus (c. 204–270 CE), freedom lay in choosing to return to a fixed point of origin. However, other systems we will consider did privilege will and desire over knowledge and reason, leading to less deterministic conclusions.

Logical determinism emerged from consideration of destiny and free will, and whether events were unavoidable, or “necessary,” as the ancients called them, particularly in light of divination or the omniscience of divine powers. Taking up the question as to whether the occurrence of an event was true or false before the event, Aristotle sought to preserve human ability to deliberate. However, the tension between notions of divine infallibility and human free will have continued through history.

Such tensions are also linked with theological determinism, the idea that humans are dependent on an omniscient God for their existence and characteristics. However, various thinkers tried to insert nuance into notions of divine infallibility, such as Saint Augustine, who maintained that God’s foreknowledge of an event did not make it involuntary. Nevertheless, Augustine maintained that humans could not save themselves by an effort of will, and especially without God’s grace. His proposal led to a variety of Christian deterministic theories about predestination of souls to salvation or damnation. Efforts to preserve human freedom in light of divine will have persisted in Christian theology, and esoteric systems have struggled with the same issues, particularly post-Renaissance. Theological determinism is connected with the great chain of being metaphor, which figures prominently below.

Physical determinism is the idea that all events in nature are rule-based. It played an important role in the nineteenth-century scientific naturalism discussed in chapter 1. It

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44 Taylor 2006, 8.
has roots in Epicurean atomistic theory. However, even physical deterministic systems tried to preserve freedom through innovations—such as the “swerve” introduced by Lucretius, who held that atoms can spontaneously change direction. However, later physical determinists such as Thomas Hobbes questioned the opposition between physical determinism and free will, and defined freedom as absence of restraint within a given system of natural qualities.45

Psychological determinism has played an important role in the twentieth-century debates over free will, since it questions whether humans can ever be certain that a thought or action is free, given the existence of unconscious forces, which can be seen to be beyond our control. This, of course, would suggest uncomfortable implications for law and morality. Frederic Myers, an early pioneer in psychology, wrestled with some of these questions, and will be studied in chapter 7.

Although genetic determinism certainly places restraints on free will, it hardly eliminates free choice. Most contemporary philosophers do not see freedom and determinism as incompatible, and the binary opposition of determinism vs. free will is largely seen as philosophically unsophisticated and dealing with unanswerable questions. Nevertheless, theological determinism retains a link with teleology and the notion of divine purpose in human life, as discussed below.

Esotericism

The meaning of esotericism is contested, and the broadest current definition, as proposed by Hanegraaff, is rejected knowledge, i.e., rejected by dominant religious, political, or

45 Taylor 2006, 11.
scientific authorities. I will draw on useful definitions and clarification of the term from three prominent authorities—Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, and Kocku von Stuckrad. My own approach is closest to Hanegraaff’s, although I also draw from Faivre and take note of von Stuckrad’s critique.

The word *esoteric* has its roots in the second century CE, when the Greek adjective *esoterikos* was first used to describe “secret” philosophical knowledge reserved for an elite. However, many esoteric systems are no longer secret, nor reserved for elites. In 1992, Faivre identified four intrinsic characteristics that he proposes form a “working model” of esotericism.\(^\text{46}\)

The first is *universal correspondences*. This is the idea that seemingly unrelated objects, such as the heavens (macrocosm) and the human body (microcosm) can influence one another. As will be seen in succeeding chapters, evolutionary esotericisms are founded in the idea of connections between the earth and heavenly worlds and between humans and divine beings.

The second of Faivre’s characteristics is *living nature*. This is a view of the natural world as ensouled, filled with what Faivre calls “invisible but active forces” that interact with humans. The forces of nature are seen as promoting or hindering human goals and are able to be harnessed, for example in the healing power of trees or water.

Faivre’s third characteristic is *mediations and the imagination*. These suggest that humans have the power, through the use of rituals and symbols, to interact with “intermediary” spirits such as angels or elemental forces to “provide passages between different levels of reality.” The imagination is sometimes seen as an intermediary of its

\(^{46}\) 2010, 12.
The fourth characteristic is transmutation, the idea that humans can be transformed into divine beings by a process of rebirth.

While Faivre’s model is helpful at describing a group of traditions that emerged between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century (his own historical focus), it has been criticized as incomplete, since its components are not found in all systems with esoteric leanings, such as mesmerism, which does not incorporate transmutation. In addition, although Faivre became aware that Asian traditions had begun to influence Western esotericism in the eighteenth century, his definition does not directly address this trend.⁴⁷

Hanegraaff has proposed a more comprehensive discussion that does not define, but proposes “theoretical limits” of “what can usefully be called western esotericism.”⁴⁸

First, Western esotericism centers around a spectrum of beliefs identifying the world as co-eternal with God. These beliefs include broadly what the Egyptologist Jan Assmann calls cosmotheism, which describes a variety of systems that see God in the world, including panentheism, which identifies the world with God, including human beings. Second, according to Hanegraaff, esotericism proposes that humans can “attain direct experiential knowledge (gnosis) of their divine nature.”⁴⁹

For the purposes of this dissertation, I primarily take esotericism as referring to Hanegraaff’s proposal that what distinguishes esotericism from other forms of religious thought is its focus on deification, or human transformation into divinity. The idea of a

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⁴⁸ 2012, 373, 370.
⁴⁹ 2012, 370.
divine potential in human nature can also be considered rejected knowledge, since it was for the most part rejected in dominant Western culture during the period considered.

The focus on the specific narrow sense of esotericism as human transformation into divinity and human participation in and taking on of formerly divine powers is not intended to ignore contemporary scholarship, particularly as articulated by von Stuckrad, that suggests that the category of esotericism cannot be defined by particular characteristics but must also be seen as a discursive one embedded in particular sociological and historical discourses. The definition of esotericism as a discursive category is kept in mind throughout. Nevertheless, since the dissertation compares across more than a century it will become evident that the elements of esotericism under study have themselves shifted categories. Some of the “esoteric” systems evaluated are perceived today as religious but in their own day were accepted as scientific or philosophical.

**Evolution**

Darwin at first resisted associating *evolution* with his theory of the transformation of species by natural selection primarily because it was already associated with teleological theories of transformation and the preformation of all life in a germ or seed. Derived from the Latin *evolvere*, which means “to roll out, or unroll,” as in a book or a scroll, *evolution* implied that whatever was being unrolled was already present in a lesser form. Pre-Darwin, in biology *evolution* meant “the process of developing from a rudimentary to a mature or complete state.” Erasmus Darwin in 1791 wrote of the “gradual evolution of

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50 See von Stuckrad 2010.
the young animal or plant from its egg or seed.” But it also carried the sense of pre-set
templates. In 1762, Charles Bonnet proposed that an embryo or germ is “a development
or expansion of a pre-existing form,” in other words, pre-formed.51

A sub-meaning of evolution, not necessarily implying a preexisting structure, was
“the process of evolving, developing, or working out in detail, what is implicitly or
potentially contained in an idea or principle; the development of a design, argument, etc.”
For example, in 1768, Johnson wrote that Shakespeare’s plays, “in the successive
evolutions of the design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes
levity and laughter.” This implies that evolution is a process of drafting that can result in
multiple possible forms, and holds some affinity with evolutionary esotericisms. In 1820,
Coleridge wrote of the “sensible world” as “but the evolution of the Truth, Love, and
Life, or their opposites, in Man.” In both Johnson’s and Coleridge’s sense there is a
suggestion that the world, the argument and the plays are not fixed in advance, but
require working out.52

In Darwin’s day, the two most common definitions of evolution were those of
Charles Lyell and Herbert Spencer, both of whom held that evolution entailed
simultaneous improvement and movement towards greater complexity. Lyell, in his
influential Principles of Geology, had written in 1852 of how ocean animals were “by
gradual evolution…improved into those inhabiting the land.”53 In Darwin’s day, Herbert
Spencer’s definition of evolution as progress from “homogeneity to…heterogeneity”
ensured that the concept of advance towards increasing complexity (and perfection)

would be linked with the theory of evolution for decades to come.\textsuperscript{54}

But after Darwin, the most common definition of evolution became simply any theory, as Bowler summarizes it, “postulating a natural process for the development of life on earth.”\textsuperscript{55} The core of the modern definition of evolution is the assertion that species are not fixed by special creation, but developed from earlier forms. In addition to a number of other senses useful in mathematics and other areas of life, Oxford also added another sense during the 1970s, “social evolution” as any theory of the natural development of human societies.\textsuperscript{56} The dictionary contains no definition of evolution as progressive self-development or personal transformation, either towards an existing template or through a process of development towards an unknown but improved end.

\textit{Posthumanism}

The term \textit{posthumanism} incorporates a variety of critiques of humanism, responses to modern technological and philosophical developments, as well as ethical thought that expands moral concern beyond humans alone. Based in the idea of the philosophical disappearance of an ontological self, it has little in common with notions of successive human improvement or the esoteric vision of transformation of humans into divine beings. Evolutionary esotericisms tend to focus on the human as unique, while posthumanists explore commonalities between humans and other species, as well as the prospect of erasing the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines.

Cary Wolfe has identified conflicting and “even irreconcilable” definitions of

\textsuperscript{54} Spencer 1857, 446.  
\textsuperscript{55} 1984, xii.  
\textsuperscript{56} Oxford English Dictionary 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 1989, s.v. “evolution.”
posthumanism but suggests that its principal aim can be found in the project of describing
the human “with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the
ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on.”  
He also quotes Étienne Balibar’s critique of humanism as having been able to define the human
only by extracting it “from animality…by means which characterized animality (the
‘survival of the fittest’), or, in other words, by an ‘animal’ competition between the
different degrees of humanity.”  
Posthumanism as Wolfe sees it “comes both before and after humanism,” and implies not a rejection of humanism but the demonstration that its
aspirations “are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to
conceptualize them.”

Although evolutionary esotericisms, with their links to humanism, appear rooted
in human exceptionalism, they do provide footholds for posthumanist ideas in their
eventual though perhaps grudging exploration of human talents inherited from animals,
such as the association of animal passions with the will or force of existence. They also
provide support for notions of the kinship of all life, which supports ethical
vegetarianism, which is often also espoused by posthumanists. Transhumanism, while
often incorporated in discussions of posthumanism (badly, according to Wolfe), is dealt
with separately below.

**Progress**

The idea of progress was embedded in history, the natural sciences—including geology

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57 2010, xi, xxv.
58 2010, xiv.
59 2010, xv, xvi.
and biology—sociology, anthropology, and religion during the nineteenth century. It can be defined simply as the idea “that the human condition has improved over the course of history and will continue to improve.” Progress and evolution by way of natural selection were linked beginning with Darwin’s first proposals. Darwin, though aware of distinctions between evolution and progress, carved out a place for it in his theory, as described by Bowler:

Although suspicious of efforts to define biological progress, Darwin could not escape the common feeling that in some ways modern forms of life are more advanced than their earliest ancestors. The real function of the theory of natural selection, however, is to adapt species to changing conditions; and in the absence of any directional trend imposed by the environment, the result will be change without progress. Darwin compromised by making progress a kind of by-product of evolution, a long-range statistical trend that did not have to affect every line of development.

During the twentieth century, particularly after World War II, widespread skepticism emerged about universal progress and the application of general laws to human civilization. Ideas of progress were also challenged by difficulties in defining improvement—was it meant in economic, scientific, or biological terms?

It also became clear that progress was too vague a question to be any longer associated with Darwinian evolution. As Bowler explains, “The popular idea of evolution

60 Meek Lange 2011.
61 1984, 11.
as progress is now seen to be inadequate on two counts. It is ambiguous, because we can define progress either as a movement toward a predetermined goal or in terms of ascending levels of general complexity. It is also misleading, because some interpretations of evolution involve only change, without implying any form of progress."62

In the esoteric traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ideas of salvation and divinization also became linked with notions of education and progress. Concepts of progressive soul evolution are a product of the modern era, and incompatible with classical and Hellenistic notions of divinization. In the esoteric tradition prior to the eighteenth century, progress was not seen as a historical process but a spiritual one. The discussion below will explore the tensions and incompatibilities between biological, historical, and spiritual theories of progress.

**Psychic Talents**

During the nineteenth century, both religious and scientific communities in Europe and the United States developed an intense interest in investigating what came to be called psychic talents, but were also known as mediumistic or mesmeric talents and psychic abilities. Reputable scientists such as the physicist William Crookes investigated psychic phenomena, such as those displayed by the medium Daniel Dunglas Home. In this dissertation, the terms *psychic, mediumistic,* and *mesmeric* talents are used somewhat interchangeably to describe phenomena ranging from telepathy and clairvoyance to teleportation, precognition, and mental or spontaneous healing. Mesmerism originated in

the eighteenth century as a system of healing but was also connected with phenomena such as clairvoyance and telepathy. However, the word *psychic* did not begin to be used to describe such phenomena until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Blavatsky, Myers, Wallace, and other figures in this history were influenced by the wave of interest in Home and other mediums, such as Stainton Moses. This dissertation does not take up the question as to whether such phenomena exist, but merely that they were believed to exist and to have relevance for both religion and science.

*Teleology*

Since the term *teleological* has already come up with reference to evolutionary esotericisms, it is important to include a definitional note. Both biological and theological systems have been categorized as teleological, i.e., leading to a specific goal or end point. Before Darwin they were tightly linked with ideas of progress and the great chain of being. In Darwin’s day, though, there was debate as to whether the theory of natural selection eliminated teleology. For T.H. Huxley, natural selection meant the end of teleology. But Darwin’s own writings seemed to support a progress towards perfection and complexity, without, however, endorsing any metaphysical telos.

Mayr argues that teleological language in biology does not represent an endorsement of non-material forces such as Henri Bergson’s *elan vital*. In addition, as pointed out by Mayr, *telos* can mean either *end point* or *goal*, and the two are not synonymous. A goal of the final perfection of the world is different from an end point of an individual, as in death or in the extinction of species. However, during the nineteenth

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63 See Mayr 1992, 118.
64 1992, 122.
century, the period on which this dissertation centers, natural selection was “widely interpreted to be teleological,” since it led to progress. Today, however, natural selection in biology is seen as an “optimization process,” which is not teleological, since it has “no definite goal.”

I will argue that many of the thinkers who developed evolutionary esotericisms, although they used teleological language deriving from esotericism and natural theology, did not necessarily have a teleological vision—and if they did, it was a fuzzy teleology, with an unknown but “higher” end point, especially since they subscribed to values of self-determination and a “modern heaven” (see chapter 2), with its notion of endless advance.

**Transhumanism**

The term *transhumanism* was used by Julian Huxley (nephew of T.H. Huxley) to describe the anticipated transformation of humanity through realizing “new possibilities of and for…human nature.” Huxley thought that these new possibilities could be addressed through both transformation of the interior life and technological enhancement. Today, however, it is more common to hear the term used to describe only an optimistic future based on the “ethical use of technology” to “expand human capabilities.”

Primary goals of twenty-first century transhumanists are to overcome aging, “cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.” According to the Transhumanist Declaration, the well-being of all sentient life should be

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66 1968, 75.
67 Humanity+ 2016.
advocated, and individuals should be able to choose how they enhance their lives.\textsuperscript{68}

According to Wolfe’s critique, transhumanism is not post-humanist because it is rather an intensification of humanism, which promotes “fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy” inherited from humanism.\textsuperscript{69}

These “fantasies” will be explored in the pages that follow, along with questions of human autonomy. Although there is some overlap with evolutionary esotericisms, the transhumanist focus on technological or medical intervention is typically deemphasized by evolutionary esotericisms, which focus instead on self-discipline and training. However, it is possible to hold both evolutionary esotericist and transhumanist ideals. This dissertation does not interrogate transhumanist visions, which for the most part developed during the 1980s, after the time period in question.

\textit{Methodology}

Three methodologies are applied in this dissertation: history of religions as the primary methodology, supported by the history of ideas, and enhanced with insights from conceptual metaphor theory as it incorporates cognitive blending. Each of these methodologies is discussed briefly below, and conceptual metaphor theory is elaborated in chapter 8.

\textit{History of Religions}

The history of religions methodology is appropriate as the primary tool for tracing the

\textsuperscript{68} Baily et al, 1998.

\textsuperscript{69} 2010, xv.
emergence of evolution as a religious concept. This methodology takes, at a minimum, the approach that religions are historical entities that arise in given periods and change over time. However, the particular version of history of religions most often today associated with the methodology focuses on the phenomenology of religious experience, particularly in its extreme or robust forms, even as it maintains a skepticism in regards to the supposed noumenal objects of religious truth claims.

Put a bit differently, it takes “transcendence” as a common feature of religious experience without accepting or defining any particular religious framing of that transcendence. It focuses instead on the ritual, mythical, institutional, textual, and historical expressions of the human religious experience. However, history of religions has transformed dramatically since its early shaping by Mircea Eliade, who described the discipline in universalist terms that have since been critiqued. In 1959, he wrote:

> The historian of religions…applies himself to deciphering in the temporally and historically concrete the destined course of experiences that arise from an irresistible human desire to transcend time and history. All authentic religious experience implies a desperate effort to disclose the foundation of things, the ultimate reality. But all expression or conceptual formulation of such religious experience is embedded in a historical context.”

70 Eliade 1959, 88–89.

It is the latter historical context that will focus our attentions here, not any particular project to disclose the foundation of things or the nature of ultimate reality. However, the reader will quickly notice that much of the discussion centers around the implications of
mediumistic and psychic phenomena for religion as well as science. Interpretations of these events, which are today often called “anomalous,” have often been taken as proof of transcendence, and are deeply entwined with the esoteric discussion of evolution.

Such experiences and events may be taken to be part of the primary data of religion, in the sense that some, including Kripal, have argued that they ought to be at the center of the study of religion. “It is precisely these extraordinary, anomalous, once-in-a-lifetime experiences that commonly stand out as the most significant and the most historically impactful events in the history of religions,” Kripal writes.\textsuperscript{71} This dissertation does not take a position as to whether such events are true descriptions of the nature of the universe, or “the foundation of things,” but does argue that it is important to chronicle the reactions in individuals and societies to reports of such events, and how they impact the direction of theology as well as attitudes towards the nature of reality.

Interestingly enough, Eliade is also a significant figure in the modern discourse around esotericized evolution. In his fiction, he explored the possibility that future humans would develop an advanced “psycho-mental life,” and would mutate into “post-historic man.”\textsuperscript{72} Eliade’s engagement with religion at a deeply personal level, together with his ideas about time—for example, his division of time into a primordial, sacred time and historical time—led to criticism that he had abandoned historical method in search of an essence of religion. For example, he identified the “hierophany” as an ontological category at the center of all religious history. Jonathan Z. Smith pronounced himself profoundly troubled by such moves, but stressed that concerns about Eliade’s universalizing tendencies should not be used to “jettison the morphological enterprise.”

\textsuperscript{71} Kripal 2017b, xl.
\textsuperscript{72} 1988, 98, 115, 139.
Smith pronounced himself in agreement with William H. Sewell, Jr.’s argument that discussions of historical transformation, in order to remain cogent, require “a dialectical oscillation between diachronic and synchronic thinking.”\footnote{J.Z. Smith 2004, 94, 98.} Modifying Eliade with respect to critiques by Smith and others, I take care to identify the cultural settings and theological allegiances of the authors evaluated, and to question their claims to scientific objectivity and religious universalism. I treat them with both a hermeneutics of respect and of suspicion, an approach advocated by Hugh Urban in his 2011 study of the Church of Scientology.

\textit{History of Ideas}

The dissertation also applies a history of ideas methodology to the religious, philosophical, and historical texts that are its primary materials. As my story unfolds, it will become apparent that there are gaps in the historical record as to how ideas about biological evolution came to be applied to personal improvement and human salvation. To determine whether a text may have been influenced by another, I rely upon principles such as priority, proximity, and similarity of language. I also provide historical and social context as relevant and available. But the picture I paint of the genesis of these ideas is a tentative one, and additional material may well surface that will alter my portrait or fill in the blank spaces.

I look for “webs of belief,” a term used by Mark Bevir in his \textit{Logic of the History of Ideas}. Bevir proposes “a synchronic form of explanation that makes sense of individual beliefs by relating them to wider webs of belief, and that makes sense of these
wider webs of belief by relating them to intellectual traditions.” Bevir continues:

Because beliefs relate to one another in webs, we can present a belief as rational by describing the web to which it belongs. Similarly, because people reach the webs of belief they do against the background of inherited traditions, we can present a web of beliefs as rational by relating it to the tradition from which it arose.  

Bevir also suggests that a combination of diachronic and synchronic methods are needed to evaluate the change of beliefs over time.

My study revolves around the question of how the theory of evolution by natural selection influenced religious and esoteric belief in the nineteenth century. A common topic in the history of ideas is how individuals with agency react to dilemmas, such as when the Bible’s creation account was drawn into question by geological discoveries, a development that preoccupied all of the thinkers in this study. Bevir proposes a method for applying a history of ideas perspective to the question of how new beliefs arise in the context of dilemmas. Historical developments, such as the theory of evolution, according to Bevir, constitute dilemmas only when individuals ascribe authority to them. Otherwise, they exist outside of the individual’s web of belief. Dilemmas, according to Bevir, are “beliefs that people reach by exercising their reason to make sense of their experiences against the background of a tradition they inherited.” Bevir notes that many religious Victorians accommodated Darwin by adapting their notions of God. “If people are to

74 1999, 29.
75 1999, 230.
76 1999, 234.
accommodate a new understanding, they must hook it on to aspects of their existing beliefs,” he writes.\(^77\) And we will be investigating the thought processes of individuals who did just that.

Nineteenth-century ideas about evolution were caught up in a web of belief based in the great chain of being metaphor. My discussion of the metaphor takes as a starting point Arthur Lovejoy’s 1933 William James lectures at Harvard, which were published in an influential volume in 1936. Lovejoy is one of the founders of the history of ideas as a discipline. Although his methodology, such as his essentializing notion of “unit ideas” is outdated, his evaluation of the metaphor of the great chain of being remains relevant for the current study.\(^78\)

Lovejoy’s primary service is to evaluate how the concept of the great chain of being was molded by historical and cultural forces. Lovejoy wrote that his aim was to “make clear, if possible, how conceptions dominant, or extensively prevalent, in one generation lose their hold upon men’s minds and give place to others.”\(^79\) The chief critiques of his historical study were of his evaluation of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, as well as his insistence that insoluble contradictions persisted in Christian theology. Theologians pointed out that these contradictions were insoluble only to those who

\(^77\) 1999, 235.
\(^78\) See D. Wilson 1987 for a review of the critique of Lovejoy. Lovejoy’s proposed methodology for a history of ideas was based on the proposal that “unit-ideas” could be described in terms borrowed from chemistry, as “elements,” as “primary and persistent or recurrent dynamic units.” (1964 [1936], 7). Challenges to unit-ideas include Quentin Skinner’s attack on what he called Lovejoy’s “reification of doctrines,” and assumption that there was such a thing as a “unit-idea” that could be traced unchanging over time: “the notion that any fixed ‘idea’ has persisted is spurious,” he wrote (Quoted in D. Wilson 1987, 201). Defending “unit ideas,” Wilson argues that “the criticisms can be resolved in part by turning away from the name of the concept to Lovejoy’s actual use of it in the book (1987, 187–88). In order to get around the difficulties with the notion of a “unit idea,” Moltke Gram and Richard Martin proposed that “family resemblances” between ideas might usefully be studied (1980, 510–11).
\(^79\) 1964, 20.
insisted on seeing them as such. His evaluation of later periods, from the eighteenth century onwards, is considered more solid, and there is no question that the metaphor was highly influential in the century just preceding Darwin. Lovejoy’s historical work can still usefully be used in this area, with care, making sure to acknowledge the change in concepts over time—for example, in the way a “principle of plenitude” might have been understood differently in classical Greece than in the medieval period.

In applying the history of ideas methodology, I am also cognizant of the need to incorporate postmodern and post-structuralist critiques of historiography in general. We can never claim have a true picture of what actually happened, or “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist,” to quote the nineteenth-century historian and promoter of historical realism Leopold von Ranke. Rather we must consider the context not only of the historical subject but also of the historian. As pointed out by Hayden White, the historian adopts a particular “mode of emplotment” and “mode of argument,” along with ideological implications, and the historical project should be aware of these modes and the tensions between them.80 As I navigate between the poles of intellectualist and contextualist evaluation, I tend towards a contextualist standpoint, though I am conscious of the need to trace the internal, intellectual qualities of the text itself.

Dominick LaCapra offers advice for tackling the historiographic issue of “the relationship between documentary reconstruction of, and dialogue with, the past.”81 In approaching my texts, I have tried to listen for the multiple voices—of class, race, sex, and epistemology. As LaCapra writes, “a text is a network of resistances, and a dialogue is a two-way affair; a good reader is also an attentive and patient listener.” He calls for

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81 1983, 27.
“an interest in what does not fit a model and an openness to what one does not expect to hear from the past.”

In my reconstruction of how religious texts were made to interact in new and different ways in the context of scientific developments of the nineteenth century, my texts include the Bible, along with gnostic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic documents, the writings of the Neoplatonists as well as popular esoteric works, even novels. I examine how these texts were incorporated into the new revelations of spiritualism and Theosophy. Yet I have not been able to penetrate the mind of Blavatsky, or the heart of Myers, to determine precisely who influenced them. Nor do I know exactly how they influenced each other through their writings, or through mutual acquaintances, and most notably during their five-and-a-half days together. Nor can I demonstrate for certain what social or intellectual allegiances they were accommodating as they developed their theological arguments. My attribution of motives to them may not be supportable. I have simply tried to identify personal interests and social contexts that may have influenced their works, especially those of Blavatsky, which were claimed to have been received from divine sources.

Short of the direct connections that might have proved influence between my two thinkers, what I have found is a shared embeddedness in a dialogue around spiritualism and science, joint residence within a resonating web of interpretation, and the possibility of direct influence. These two thinkers are remembered today because their narrative talents gave their particular versions of the story a louder voice and longer reach than those that have been forgotten, but they were not alone.

82 1983, 64.
In trying to highlight portions of this web, I have, in the words of Donald R. Kelley, performed the work that requires historians to “continue both to reflect and to scan the horizons of experience—both to essay retrospective mind-reading to assess motives, intention, lines of argument, goals, values, etc., and to seek connections with external conditions and forces.”83 I do not buy into the religious or progressive ideas I consider. In White’s parlance, I have adopted a satirical mode of emplotment and an ironical trope—things change but they also stay the same and repeat. In so doing, I have engaged in what White calls the poetic side of the job of the historian, to “prefigure as a possible object of knowledge the whole set of events reported in the documents.”84 I do feel that a certain poetry has emerged from the process, as pieces seem to fit together in ways I did not anticipate. I have extracted themes and tendencies from my data, and used these to give what I think is the most likely explanation for the way these ideas developed over time. And although I do not think feats of genius or apparent telepathy demonstrate divine presence or purpose, I think they are worth studying as a way of expanding our understanding of human life.

Finally, a word about epistemologies and religion. Religion deals with beliefs many consider irrational. I am dealing here with figures who simultaneously hold rational and irrational ideas, and some who have been accused of trickery and fraud. (For many people, all of religion is trickery and fraud.) Bevir points out that analyzing the attraction of webs of belief in response to dilemmas requires that the beliefs “remain sincere, conscious and rational.” However, historians can also study beliefs that they believe to be “insincere, unconscious, and irrational” and historians can explain them as the product of

83 2005, 166.
“deception, self-deception, and irrationality.”

Bevir uses the notion of a “pro-attitude,” a “preference for a state of affairs,” to explain why people adopt irrational beliefs. “Pro-attitudes,” for example in the sense of predicting that science will prove religion, certainly may be seen at work in the history that follows. And I have not been shy about ascribing unconscious or irrational beliefs to my interlocutors, where warranted, though I have stopped at questioning their sincerity. (My discussion briefly touches on the nature of mediumship and the role of conscious or unconscious deception in channeling, a topic to which I hope to return.)

But to explain the development of beliefs about evolution, particularly as they may have been affected by factors of which the thinkers were unaware or not in control, which can all fall into the basket of “unconscious factors,” I find the need to go beyond historical evaluation to cognitive theories, in particular conceptual metaphor theory. It makes sense to supplement the historical evaluation with a search for deeper structure or logic in subterranean currents derived from conceptual metaphor. Innate structures of the human brain are also culturally conditioned, and can unconsciously shape our sense of the world and our place in it.

Although Bevir himself rejects physiology as a mode of explanation for belief, I do think that cognitive neuroscience has something to offer the historian of ideas. I am aware that in combining historical methodologies with conceptual metaphor theory, I am at risk of engaging in the same kind of universalizing morphological and structural

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85 1999, 265.
86 See Bevir 1999, 265–308.
87 Rennie (2007) has argued for complementarity between Eliade’s understanding of religion and cognitive theory, though some scholars worry that the cognitive turn also risks a return to essentialism.
88 1999, 29.
thinking that has been so criticized in both history of ideas and the study of religions. However, conceptual metaphor theory does acknowledge the change of metaphors over time, a phenomenon that is partially addressed by the addition of blending theory to conceptual metaphor theory. As discussed below, linguistic theorists have developed guidelines for managing diachronic and synchronic models, which are used judiciously in my evaluation.

**Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory**

Approaches to the study of religion through cognitive linguistics have become more common in the last thirty years. Armin Geertz has called conceptual metaphor theory, which arose out of cognitive linguistics, “one of the most methodologically useful to the study of religious texts.” It has been applied to religious concepts with increasing frequency. This application arises from the work of Lakoff and Johnson, who in 1980 published the influential *Metaphors We Live By*, which built upon earlier research suggesting that our thoughts are constrained by our bodies and environment. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that thoughts—including attitudes towards the divine—are structured by specific metaphors based in our everyday experience. Since then, they and others have identified a series of embedded metaphors that condition thought and culture. In other words, they theorize that not just any thoughts are likely to take root in human cultures; those that resonate with our embodied minds will take priority.

One simple and seemingly culturally universal metaphor is “more is up.” *Up* evokes wellness and strength, whereas *down* evokes lack, poverty, and illness. Metaphors

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89 Geertz 2004, 377.
based on how the body situates itself in space are considered “basic” metaphors. Over the past thirty years, a variety of research in linguistics and neuroscience has verified the cross-cultural nature of basic metaphors such as “knowing is seeing.” And even though metaphors also change cross-culturally, they do so along pathways conditioned by embodied cognition. In 1990, “[Eve] Sweetser demonstrated that conceptual metaphor provides ‘routes’ for possible changes of word meaning over the course of history.”

Lakoff and Johnson and other colleagues have identified a variety of schema that seem ingrained in our bodies and minds. However, conceptual metaphor theory as originally conceived, although successful at identifying primary metaphors and the schema they support, was less successful initially at explaining the change in application of metaphor over time. Therefore, it was necessary to incorporate Fauconnier and Turner’s blending theory, which Lakoff and Johnson did in 1999 with *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

Blending theory takes up the question of how ideas come to be combined. Fauconnier and Turner, who acknowledge that all sorts of impossible combinations of ideas are tried every day, most of which do not persist, use an analogy with the theory of natural selection. They suggest that almost anything can be tried, but only certain mutations succeed. In evolution, “Out of many, many, many, many new combinations, almost all failures, come enough successes to give us a world of beetles and roses, glowworms and titmice, viruses and naked mole rats. In crucial respects, the construction of meaning is like the evolution of species.”

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90 Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 85. Note: the names of conceptual metaphors are generally capitalized in linguistic literature, a practice which is followed in chapter 8.  
91 Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 85.  
92 Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 309.
Blending theory provides insight into how religions gain authority by combining contradictory ideas. As Fauconnier and Turner describe it, conceptual blending operates with such “speed and invisibility” that it comes to appear almost automatic. 93 “After a blend has been constructed, the correspondences—the identities, the similarities, the analogies—seem to be objectively a part of what we are considering, not something we have constructed mentally,” they write. 94 Blends take on lives of their own and foster creative change not only in the arts and in religion, but also in everyday life, mathematics, and science. For example, complex and imaginary numbers are blends. As Fauconnier and Turner point out, “Many blends are not only possible but also so compelling that they come to represent, mentally, a new reality, in culture, action, and science.” 95

Interestingly enough, the idea of a great chain of being, a crucial influence on evolutionary esotericisms, is part of a complex metaphor evaluated by Lakoff and Turner in More than Cool Reason. They describe it as “a cognitive model that we use to make sense of, and impose order on, the universe. It is acquired culturally, at least in its extended forms.” 96 They argue that the great chain of being metaphor—which establishes a hierarchy running from objects and natural forces to animals, people, and divine beings—exists in many cultures. It facilitates comparisons, for example, between human behavior and natural forces or animals.

However, a more complicated version of this metaphor has been elaborated in Western philosophy, as discussed below. Lakoff and Turner question the tendency of

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93 2002, 18.
95 2002, 21.
96 1989, 62.
historians to portray this metaphor as a discarded framework of the history of ideas—“it is taught as if it somehow died out in the industrial age.” They argue that it remains highly influential in our culture. “A highly articulated version of it still exists as a contemporary unconscious cultural model indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language.”

I present evidence as to various historical applications of this metaphor and evaluate whether its embeddedness in our embodied nature (in basic forms) and in our culture (in more complex forms) can help to explain the persistence of certain types of evolutionary esotericisms.

Fauconnier and Turner’s blending theory proposes that there are a variety of ways in which existing concepts can be blended to create new ones. They identify several types of blend, which they call simplex, mirror, single-scope, double- and multiple-scope, categorized based on the number and complexity of inputs that feed into a particular new concept. The types of blends can be distinguished from one another based on the number of organizing input frames that project into the blend, and whether or not there are “clashes” between the inputs.

One of the more complicated types of blending is the multiple-scope network, a system of two or more inputs with different organizing frames. When the frames clash, a new idea often emerges. I argue that the esoteric term evolution blends concepts from biology, esotericism, and religion to extend the meaning of “salvation” outside of traditional religion, such that “Evolve!” becomes a secularized salvation, meaning something both similar to and different from “Be Saved!”

Fauconnier and Turner identify multiple-scope blending at the center of creative change in society. Successful blending combines both “conservatism and novelty” to “produce new, well-anchored conceptual and formal structures.” They have identified a series of governing principles for successful blends. The overarching principle is to “achieve a human scale.” I will argue that the components of evolutionary esotericism that became prominent enough to enter Roszak’s typology are those that achieve a human scale, and that fantastic or less-human elements tended to be discarded or simplified in historical iterations of the blend. Most of the components of Roszak’s typology of evolutionary esotericism coalesced during the nineteenth century as a multiple-scope blend between frames relating to religion, esotericism, and biology. The historical work that follows in chapters 1 through 7 seeks the origins of the components of the blend, which are evaluated in detail using conceptual metaphor theory in chapter 8.

When conducting a historical analysis of the use of a metaphor, the question arises as to whether metaphor theory is compatible with a historical methodology, given that some applications of metaphor theory are based on a search for cross-cultural universals. Historians have developed a basic framework for combining conceptual metaphor theory with historical methods. Andreas Musolff proposes that “cognitive, historical and discursive dimensions of metaphor analysis” be viewed as “complementary aspects” and that they do not “contradict or exclude each other.” Although the use of a metaphor may change over time, it does not necessarily have a “life cycle,” Musolff argues, as some had previously maintained from a history of ideas perspective, but rather

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99 2002, 312.
100 2010, 70, 85.
needs to be examined for “diachronic patterns” and the provision of a “discourse history that relates the argumentative bias of metaphorical mappings and scenarios to the communicative effects in the socio-historical contexts,” and looks for “continuities and discontinuities in…patterns of metaphor use.” In combining the historical and metaphorical evaluation, I will keep these principles in mind. Summary tables are used through chapters 1 through 7 to identify components that will be evaluated in chapter 8.

I am aware of the risks in combining multiple methodologies in order to gain a clearer picture of historical events. J. Z. Smith wrote of how he often shared the following thought on methodology with his students: “a methodological or theoretical position is not some magic wand that makes problems disappear. Each position assumed entails costs and consequences. The question is not one of deciding on solutions but of choosing what set of costs one is willing to bear.” In this case, I have taken the, perhaps mistaken, position that triangulating among multiple methodologies will allow me to mitigate the particular costs of each method, thereby providing a more focused overall picture than would be revealed by a single methodology.

**Chapter Summaries**

**Introduction**

The introduction summarizes existing academic work on esotericized evolution, defines key terms, identifies ten elements of Roszak’s popular strain of esotericized evolution, and briefly reviews the methodologies to be applied: history of religions, history of ideas,
and conceptual metaphor theory. It concludes with a summary of each chapter, which lists the historical evidence to be presented.

**Chapter 1: Body and Soul in Western Esoteric Traditions**

Esoteric responses to Darwin did not emerge in a vacuum. Chapter 1 begins a review of the sweep of religious, philosophical, and scientific ideas that shaped the esoteric framework from which responses to Darwin were crafted. It centers on the classical, medieval, and Renaissance development of the great chain of being metaphor, which influenced biology, philosophy, and religion. It begins with Plato and ends with Jakob Böhme, in the process enhancing Lovejoy’s 1936 study of the chain with insights from esotericism. It adds components that he neglected, such as the Hermetic traditions, Renaissance humanism, and the more immanentist philosophy of Paracelsus and Meister Eckhart.

**Chapter 2: Human Destiny in the Expanded Universe**

The discourses of Kepler and Copernicus impacted esoteric thought and made possible new ideas in an expanded universe. Prominent thinkers who navigated this larger universe included Emanuel Swedenborg and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who also influenced an emerging “modern heaven” paradigm. The chapter continues to trace the great chain of being metaphor through the nineteenth century and introduces the mental healing pioneers Joseph Ennemoser, Andrew Jackson Davis, and Warren Felt Evans. It also demonstrates the inception of one of the important components of Roszak’s typology, the narrative around evolution as the awakening of latent human talents. The chapter concludes with a review of competing ideas of biological human transformation.
pre-Darwin, including those of Robert Chambers and Herbert Spencer, who incorporated progressive evolutionary ideas into notions of human development.

Chapter 3: Darwin, Wallace, and Victorian Science on the Evolution of Mind and Culture

After a review of the major relevant propositions of the *Origin of Species*, the chapter examines the progress narrative at the heart of Darwinism, the relationship between Darwinism and Lamarckism, and the debates about the influence of morality and culture on human evolution as they unfolded in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Any discussion of nineteenth-century esoteric responses to Darwin must also include a broad outline of religious response to Darwin as well as an examination of the supposed ensuing war between science and religion, which was more a struggle over materialist and spiritual outlooks. The chapter concludes with a review of the battle over materialism, particularly as articulated by John Tyndall and T.H. Huxley, over distinctions between mechanism and vitalism, which also fueled esoteric speculations.

Chapter 4: The Evolution of Blavatsky’s “Double” Evolution

Helena Blavatsky was one of the first esoteric authors to respond to Darwin, and it is argued here that her proposal for a “double evolution” to describe the separate evolution of soul and body is the first such use of the term. The chapter identifies underlying and clashing objectives of her book *Isis Unveiled*, which was published in New York in 1877, and quotes Darwin, Huxley, and Tyndall. In fact, although she quotes him, Blavatsky engaged very little with Darwin, and her primary interlocutors were Huxley and Tyndall. Her purpose was to oppose materialism and defend human free will and purpose against
biological determinism. Her dialogue is contextualized in light of liberal and spiritualist religious reactions to Darwin, including the spiritualist proposals of Alfred Russel Wallace. Her goals developed out of controversies from within spiritualism, particularly as centered around the trance speaker Emma Hardinge Britten, as well as the larger debates about materialism. She also hoped to develop religious viewpoints that could incorporate science and harness a general dissatisfaction with Christian orthodoxy.

Chapter 5: Latent Talents, Blavatsky’s Secret Doctrine, and Root Race Theory

The chapter evaluates the setting in which Blavatsky’s system of salvation, known as root race theory, was developed. It begins with a review of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *The Coming Race* and Victorian race theory, which includes Darwin’s own discussion of latent animal talents available for human development. It traces the development of “root race theory” and evaluates its association with racist concepts of human development. Root race theory emerged during Blavatsky’s long stay in India and her relationship with A.P. Sinnett, who first publicized the mysterious channeled Mahatma letters that provide the early foundations of the theory. In spite of the racist elements of the system, the letters introduced the adept or “master” as a template for human evolution, and expanded the narrative on salvation as evolution through adeptship and development of latent talents.

Chapter 6: Unmanageable Visions in Root Race Theory: Giant Red Apes and Hermaphrodites

Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* presented her mature evolutionary system, which greatly complicated her approach to evolution, and proved unwieldy for future teachers.
Important aspects of this system did not take hold in the popular imagination, such as her depiction of gigantic hermaphrodites and intelligent red apes as precursors to human development. The chapter shows how tensions in the model emerged from her attempt to reconcile disparate viewpoints, resulting in an unwieldy and confusing solution, open to multiple interpretations. For example, although Blavatsky viewed the special powers of mystics as evidence for higher modes of existence, she was conflicted about whether humans should develop their special talents. As she attempted to legitimate herself for conservative Indian followers, she began to denigrate psychic talents, claiming that they did not demonstrate spiritual wisdom. Finally, Blavatsky’s innovations in adapting Eastern concepts of karma and reincarnation, and her association of reincarnation with evolution are evaluated, including the compatibility of her system with the evolutionary science of her day.

Chapter 7: Myers, His Influences and Appealing Vision of Human Evolutionary Destiny

The evolutionary system of the Victorian classicist and psychical researcher Frederic W.H. Myers is evaluated and its influences are examined. The focus is on the dialogue around latent human talents as exhibited by spiritualist mediums and Indian fakirs, especially. Myers’s engagement with Darwin is also reviewed and contextualized. Myers held Darwin in high regard, listing him as one of the “three greatest Englishmen of our century,” along with Wordsworth and Tennyson. Myers maintained a deep allegiance to a Christianized Platonism while attempting to incorporate theories of natural selection. Myers paid special attention to unusual phenomena such as telepathy (a word he coined

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103 1901, 166.
in 1882), and proposed the term “supernormal” to describe them. He argued that these talents exhibited the action of natural laws related to advanced stages of “evolution” meant to be accessed by all.

This chapter presents a more complete picture of Myers’s engagement with Theosophy than previous treatments, which confined it to a discussion of the 1885 historical split between the Society for Psychical Research and Theosophy. However, Myers’s continued contacts with the Theosophist A.P. Sinnett and former Theosophist C.C. Massey provide potential avenues by which Theosophical ideas entered his work. Correspondence from the Myers archive is reviewed. Myers’s mature evolutionary esotericism is outlined as a blending of his own insights about human talents from psychical research with some Darwinism along with Christian Platonism and Theosophy. A summary of Myers’s system concludes the chapter.

Chapter 8: Myers, Blavatsky, and Conceptual Blending

Conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory are applied to the systems reviewed in order to provide an explanation for the persistence and cohesion of some of the elements of Roszak’s 1975 typology. Chapter 8 associates the components of Roszak’s typology with some of their likely antecedents, including Theosophy, spiritualism, and psychical research. It then applies the principles of blending theory to explain the combination of seemingly contradictory ideas. It then evaluates the mappings that permit the blends “Evolution is Salvation” and “Salvation is Therapy.” Finally, it shows that twentieth-century spiritual “evolution” is a complex, multiple-scope blend.

104 See Hamilton 2009, 129–38. Hamilton was constrained from further exploring the relationship of Myers to Theosophy by the scope of his biographical project (Hamilton 2016).
Conclusion: Twentieth-Century Transformations and Future Research Directions

The conclusion examines the twentieth-century afterlife of Blavatsky’s speculations made their way into a variety of systems united by a theme of “soul” evolution. These systems built on her thought as well as that of Myers, which is difficult to track since it become almost generic as it decoupled from its context in psychical research. During the later twentieth century, many of the groups identified by Roszak incorporated the language of evolution to describe ideas related to both individual and species-level transformation. They focused on the development of new therapies and extraordinary human talents as well as the restoration of “ancient” techniques. But for the most part they continued to develop in ways that conform to conceptual metaphor theory.

Table 1: Summary of Roszak’s Ten-Part 1975 Description of Spiritual Evolution

1. Humans descended from animals but natural selection does not entirely explain the evolution of human spiritual and mental activity as both consciousness and culture.
2. Humans can direct the evolution of their species through transforming culture.
3. We were created in the image of a god we are called upon to imitate.
4. We can take control of our own evolution through changing our minds. “The way forward is… the way inward.”
5. Unusual powers of mind are talents that all will one day possess as humans “evolve.”
6. The next stage of human evolution requires conscious transformation of the personality.
7. Traditional wisdom (backwards) is the key to going forwards. We can get help from “advanced” formerly human beings.
8. Healing promotes evolution, and religion is therapy.
9. The erotic points the way to transcendence.
10. Exclusive truth claims are impossible and experience is the barometer of truth.
Chapter 1: Body and Soul in Western Esoteric Traditions

The Lord let the house of a brute to the soul of a man,
And the man said, ‘Am I your debtor?’
And the Lord—‘Not yet; but make it as clean as you can,
And then I will let you a better.’

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, “By an Evolutionist,” 1889

Those who forged imaginal connections between apes, angels, and humans in the
teneteenth-century relied on a particular set of mental furniture. Plato, of course. And the
Bible. And a ladder or chain connecting man and God. And they did use the word
“man”—to describe men, women, and children—all “mankind,” in other words. From the
beginning of our study to the end, from Darwin to Teilhard de Chardin, and including the
women Emma Hardinge Britten and Helena Blavatsky, all of the figures studied in this
work used the word man to describe the human race. The Descent of Man, The
Phenomenon of Man. But they also used it in another sense—to contrast men with
women. “Man” will certainly not be the only polysemous word to be reviewed in this
study, or the only one whose meaning has changed over time. In order to accommodate
modern sensibilities, I substitute “human” for “man” outside of direct quotation, but I
have also let our thinkers speak in their own language.

During the next two chapters, we will go over some of the philosophical concepts
that were taken for granted in the subculture we are studying. The great chain metaphor
ranked beings by their perceived station in life. In many of the later systems, “man” was

simply a stand-in for everyone. But in earlier depictions, such a Plato’s, men did
explicitly rank above women, above children and animals. Plato went further than that.
He also ranked people by their moral qualities. He even connected the shape of the head
with the quality of the soul. These notions sound deterministic, and the great chain
metaphor could be marshalled in support of a status quo. But as we will see, in various
iterations it could also suggest expanded possibility, self-transformation, and change. The
presence of “brutes,” of animal life below humankind seemed by analogy to foreshadow
an improved future.

The traditions explored in this chapter include Platonic, Hermetic, gnostic, and
Neoplatonic systems. I will be placing special emphasis on the Hermetic traditions, which
give humans a special place in the world. They suggest the creator needs the world, and
especially humans, in order to be complete, and that in the process of living, progressing,
and perfecting themselves, humans also perfect the divine nature.

Hermetic traditions are a part of the esoteric systems that, from both inside and
outside traditional religion, have struggled with the question of human nature, given its
changeability and imperfection, and come up with answers that differ greatly from the
orthodox Christian. By placing agency in the individual, esoteric responses to Darwin
incorporated a collection of ideas that emphasize free will and human effort over divine
grace (though some also made room for grace and salvation). Salvation in these systems,
however, is framed as transformation into divinity or divinization.

The emphasis on individual agency dates back to Hellenistic times, specifically
with emanationist Neoplatonic and gnostic religions as they developed from the second
century forward. Theses systems incorporated Platonic ideas about the body. They
viewed the body as inhabited by a soul and proposed that after death, the soul would undergo some kind of divinization. The body was often portrayed ambivalently, as something to be overcome or left behind. However, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, panentheist views, which saw the body and material world as ensouled, became more common.

This chapter investigates how systems of human transformation changed over time, beginning with Hermetic traditions and Neoplatonism and moving through Renaissance humanism to the nature-oriented immanentist systems of Paracelsus and Jakob Böhme. As Hanegraaff describes it, the view of human potential during the history of Western esotericism “slowly moved on a scale from otherworldly to this-worldly.” These ideas would have an important influence on two of the components of Roszak’s typology of evolution: evolution as gradual or staged progress and evolution as healing or therapy. And yet as we will see, the transcendent modes remained attractive to thinkers such as Blavatsky and many spiritualists, who positioned themselves closer to the otherworldly end of the scale.

These systems provide the conceptual building blocks that thinkers working after Darwin could use to fashion evolutionary esotericisms, with all of their inherent tensions and contradictions. The systems discussed in this chapter are by no means the only ones available to ancient thinkers, which included, in addition to Platonism, atomist theories, and those of the Stoics and Aristotelians. By Darwin’s day, neither Platonism nor Aristotelianism were looked to as sources of scientific information. Nevertheless, they and systems that elaborated upon or even subverted them continued to hold sway in the

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2 2005, 38.
popular and religious imagination.

**Plato’s View of the Soul as Available to Renaissance Thinkers**

Plato’s ideas about the soul are hardly consistent, and led to tensions that we will see continuing in the writings of Blavatsky, Myers, and other responders to Darwin. Plato codified and elaborated historical Greek ideas about the soul. And, since there was no clear doctrine of the soul in Hebrew or ancient Jewish thought (what the Christians canonized as the “Old Testament”), it was primarily through Plato that the concept of the soul entered Jewish, Christian, and esoteric thought.

At times, Plato suggested that the human has three parts, at other times two. At times, the body is the enemy, the tomb of the soul; at other times, the body is part of the soul. Sometimes, for example in the *Phaedo*, the soul is associated with the ideal Forms, the templates for all creation, which dwell in the realm of perfection inhabited by the form of the Good (God in later schemes). At other times, the soul is described in “ectoplasmic terms,” in the words of T.M. Robinson, as a subtle fluid that animates the body. As pointed out by Lautaro Roig-Lanzillotta, “Plato’s variety of views not only failed to help later Platonists to resolve their doubts regarding the soul-body relationship but also frequently made this even more complicated, as they seemed to provide scriptural support for many opinions.”

A “tripartite” psychology, or division of the human into three parts, was common in ancient times. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato compares these three parts to a charioteer driving

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3 2000, 43.
4 2017, 17.
two horses—one rational, one passionate. Another tripartite scheme is given in the Republic, with the soul divided into “reason, spiritedness and ‘gut’ desire,” all three of which must work in balance for optimal human functioning. A different tripartite scheme is given in the Timaeus, which tells us that the human is three—intelligence (nous), inside of soul, inside of body. The most common takeaway from Plato is that only the rational part of the soul is immortal, and yet there is some tension with his other ideas about the necessity for balance and optimal function. Plato never resolved the question as to which parts of the soul survive death, which led to confusion in later systems.

Key to Plato’s scheme in the Timaeus and the Phaedrus is the idea that the body and the emotions are “lower” than the soul, which is often allied to rationality, mind, or thought. The soul must control and “master” the emotions in order to become “just.” As proof, he fastened on a claimed similarity between the head (seat of reason) and the highest good, the divine cosmos. The head is “ball-shaped,” in imitation of “the revolving shape of the universe,” and hence is “the most divine part of us, and master of all our other parts.” The body is merely its vehicle. The head sits at the top of the body because the “top” is superior to the body. It is the “dwelling place of that most divine, most sacred part of ourselves.” The part of the soul living in the head is the immortal soul, while a “mortal type of soul” lives in the body.

Finally, and almost comically, but with interesting ramifications for our

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5 Phaedr. 253d. However, as pointed out by Robinson, this three-part scheme is more akin to a two-part scheme, given that the charioteer and the rational horse are both considered to be allied with rational thought (2000, 52).
7 Tim. 30b.
8 Tim. 44d, 44e, 45a (Zeyl 1997, 1248).
9 Tim. 69c–e (Zeyl 1997, 1270–71).
discussion of the human relationship to animals, as well as conceptual metaphor theory, Plato declared that animal heads, not being ball-shaped, are reserved for souls of men who value passion over reason, or are stupid and ignorant. Water animals, with their flattened heads, are more “tainted with transgressions” than land animals. Plato further compared aspects of the human body to animal parts. He specifically tied passions to the animal nature by declaring that the male genitals are “unruly and self-willed, like an animal that will not be subject to reason.” This imagery supports the anti-body sensibility that informs the rejection of sexual reproduction in many esoteric systems, and the quest for non-sexual means of generation.

The Timaeus was the most widely available of the Platonic dialogues in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is also the source of most of the ideas about the soul that became further developed in many esoteric systems, including: The universe was created out of divine goodness (the Good). The creator empowered demiurges (angels and divine beings) to assist with creation. Invisible souls are “implanted” in or interwoven with bodies. Souls are made of mixed natures but are also immortal. The soul can escape the body after death to the perfect world by way of suppressing the emotions and promoting the rational nature during life. Souls are rewarded and punished after death, and may reincarnate on earth (though reincarnation is often omitted by imitators of Plato’s system). And finally, each soul is assigned to a star and those who live a good life may return to the star after death.

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10 Tim. 91e-92b, Zeyl 1997, 1290.
12 Tim. 40–41.
14 Phaedr. 245c.
15 Tim. 41e-42b.
As mentioned, the *Timaeus* also supports a hierarchy seen in later chain of being metaphors, in which men are above women, who in turn are above animals. Men who “master” the “emotions” are considered to have lived a “just” life, and can return to the star from which they were assigned at creation. Those who do not master the emotions (cowards and the unjust\(^{16}\)) are reborn as women or as “some wild animal that resembled the wicked character he had acquired.”\(^{17}\) Animals are descended from undeserving men who did not control their desires or followed the lower parts of their souls.\(^{18}\) The *Timaeus* is but one of Plato’s systems of judgment, but it proved long-lasting.

By putting reason above passion and desire, the *Timaeus* also invoked a common metaphorical schema associating “up” with health and goodness, and “down” with lack and illness. For centuries, it was accepted as natural that mind should be superior to body, emotions and passions, which were associated with animals. Conceptual metaphor theory, as discussed later, would use embodied cognition to explain the persistence of this association.

As will be demonstrated, Plato’s three-part psyche and charioteer disciplining the unruly horse (the animal passions) are at the root of the uncomfortability with the body and the passions in overlapping Christian and esoteric traditions, which also led to resistance to incorporating biological connections between humans and animals. This uncomfortability especially emerges in Blavatsky’s Theosophical system. It was her resistance to linking the human body with primates that led to some of the more incomprehensible (and unpopular) portions of her system, such as the concept of souls

\(^{16}\) *Tim*. 90e.

\(^{17}\) *Tim*. 42c, Zeyl 1997, 1245.

\(^{18}\) *Tim* 91–2.
inhabiting huge nebulous bodies prior to human forms. As we move forward with our analysis, we will see, however, that Plato provided foundational elements of the great chain of being.

**Table 2: Common Ideas about the Soul Derived from Platonism**

1. Invisible souls are “implanted” in (*Tim.* 42a) or interwoven with bodies (*Tim.* 34-37).
2. Souls are made of mixed natures but are also immortal (*Phaedr.* 245c).
3. The soul can escape the body to the perfect world by way of suppressing the emotions, and promoting the rational nature.
4. Souls are rewarded and punished after death, and may reincarnate on earth.
5. Souls assigned to stars and may return there after a good life.
6. Men are above women, who are above animals on the scale of being.

**The Great Chain of Being in Philosophy, Religion, and Biology**

The metaphor of a great chain of being linking lower and higher orders of nature reached its height of popularity in the eighteenth century and influenced philosophical, theological, and biological or naturalistic theories of creation. Arthur Lovejoy’s 1936 *The Great Chain of Being* traces this metaphor in various transformations from Plato forward. Lovejoy’s study has been influential in a variety of disciplines, including history of ideas, philosophy, literature, and even linguistics.

He identified images of a “chain,” ladder, or hierarchy of beings ranging from the lowliest creature up to God, originally based on Plato and Aristotle, and further articulated in Neoplatonism and later transformations. He located its peak of influence in the eighteenth century, after which it was temporalized and eventually collapsed, he claimed, under the dual onslaughts of biological science and modern philosophical thought. Lovejoy argued that the transformation of the metaphor over time was caused in
part by its response to changing historical developments, but also by varying attempts to resolve its inherent tensions between what he called the two Platonic gods—the absolute and the incomplete. The metaphor thus became an engine of philosophical and theological change, both inside and outside Christianity.

Lovejoy began with Plato and, as he pointed out, though modern classicists see many Platos, for the Neoplatonists, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Romantic thinkers of interest to this study, Platonism was “to them a single and, in the main, coherent system of thought” as well as the source of otherworldliness, with the *Timaeus* centrally located.

Lovejoy’s argument hinged on an identified cleavage between otherworldliness and this-worldliness in Plato, who simultaneously identified the “real” with a transcendent (spiritual) world while also setting forth the necessity of this world through a “principle of plenitude, which holds that “the world is the better, the more things it contains.”20 The tension between the idea of a complete and self-sufficient creator who is nevertheless driven to create is only somewhat alleviated by the “principle of continuity,” which Lovejoy identifies as being fused with the “Platonistic doctrine of the necessary ‘fulness’ of the world.”21

This introduced a further logical opposition into subsequent systems of classification, the distinction between “discrete, well-defined class-concepts and…continuity…the…universal overlappingness of the real world.”22 It was Aristotle who suggested in *De generatione animalium* “the idea of arranging (at least) all animals

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19 1964, 35.
20 1964, 52.
21 1964, 55.
22 1964, 57.
in a single graded *scala naturae* according to their degree of ‘perfection.’”

Aristotle judged the scale by the development of offspring at birth, and ranged them from man at the top to zoophytes at the bottom. Later naturalists used his scale as a starting point. What Lovejoy identifies as the principle of continuity is closely linked with the philosophical concept of emanationism, which presents the lower elements of nature as necessarily connected to, and overflowing from, the goodness and perfection of the higher. Emanationism was most fully developed in Neoplatonism, as discussed below.

Aristotle’s work also led to a “principle of unilinear gradation,” which Lovejoy identified as the third basic element of the great chain metaphor. Coupled with continuity and fullness, the metaphor contributed to a conception of the universe which was accepted unquestioningly, as Lovejoy described it, until the eighteenth century by “many philosophers, most men of science, and, indeed, most educated men.” This chain was viewed as being “composed of an immense, or—by the strict but seldom rigorously applied logic of the principle of continuity—of an infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order form the meagerest kind of existents…to the highest possible kind of creature.”

As discussed in detail in chapter 8, blending theory offers rich insights into the way the great chain metaphor was able to accommodate the contradictions identified by Lovejoy by blending clashing concepts from several domains, as elaborated below.

When the metaphor was temporalized in the eighteenth century, divine attributes were transferred to Nature. But the naturalists who shaped the concepts of progress and evolution that were available to Darwin continued to draw on the metaphor as they tried to make sense of the varieties of species, layers of fossils, and emerging knowledge about

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23 1964, 58.
24 1965, 59.
the age of the earth and geological strata. Even after Darwin’s scheme abandoned a hierarchy in favor of a branching tree with many dead ends, the notion of a hierarchy persisted. Lovejoy described the metaphor as finally unravelling in the nineteenth century under the weight of its inherent contradictions, as well as Darwinism and science, but he did not address its continued relevance in religion and esotericism. One reason for Lovejoy’s failure to recognize the chain’s continued salience could be his omission of the Hermetic tradition, which was highly influential and should be considered in any historical evaluation.

**Hermetic Traditions and the Great Chain**

The “anthropology,” or depiction of the nature of humans and their souls, in the *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus* inspired a vast range of contradictory systems in antiquity, including Neoplatonic, gnostic, and Judeo-Christian. These systems differed on many points, including the purity and divinity of the soul—for example, proposals for a lower, perishable, or “animal,” soul—and whether there was an intermediary between the divine and the soul, such as *intellect* or *mind*, which are words commonly used to translate the Greek term *nous*.

A number of these systems contained elements of Hermetic traditions, which form an unlikely substrate of many components of European philosophy. Hermeticism was certainly one of the strongest influences on Blavatsky, but also on major Renaissance and Enlightenment figures such as Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, and even Hegel. Hermetism is the term commonly used to describe the ancient “philosophical Hermetica

and their commentaries,” which were attributed in antiquity to Hermes Trismegistus, and *Hermeticism* to describe the “entire syncretic mixture” that emerged from the translation of Hermetic manuscripts by Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth century.\(^{26}\) To avoid confusion, I use the term “Hermetic tradition” rather than “Hermetism” when referring to the ancient texts. Most of the Hermetic texts are believed to have been produced in Alexandria between the first and third centuries CE. They derive from the cultural melting pot created after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, in which Greek, Jewish, and Egyptian religious ideas circulated freely. The Hermetica identify the Greek god Hermes, who was revered in Roman Egypt around the first century CE, with the Egyptian god Thoth. There is no scholarly agreement as to how the Hermetic tradition developed, with some placing more emphasis on Greek origins, others on Egyptian. Some describe it as simply transposing initiation from Greek mystery religions into an exotic setting. While the Hermetic tradition does include Greek ideas about the soul that were not present in pharaonic thought, key aspects of initiation and magic common to the circle that produced the Hermetic manuscripts are now traceable to Egypt, both to pharaonic religion and a set of documents known as the Greek magical papyri. In addition, the Hermetica also express themes from Jewish mysticism, as identified by Quispel.\(^{27}\)

The Hermetica comprises seventeen texts known as the Corpus Hermeticum, along with other works, such as a Book of Definitions, and a text called the Perfect Discourse, or Asclepius. Although fragments exist from ancient times, the earliest complete manuscripts of the Corpus Hermeticum date from the Byzantine era. The texts do not present a uniform view of the soul. Some are more optimistic than others about

\(^{26}\) Hanegraaff 2006, ix-x n12.
\(^{27}\) Quispel 1999, 10.
human nature and destiny. What makes the Hermetic tradition important to our
discussion of evolution is its more pronounced this-worldliness and empowerment of
humans in ways that even Plato at his most optimistic does not do. For the god
Thoth/Hermes is also said to have once been human, a notion that sets forth a template
for the transformation of humans into divine beings.\textsuperscript{28}

The Hermetic creator deity is both outside the world and a part of it. In the
Hermetic myth, God created an archetypal human who fell in love with material creation
and was tasked with completing it. This primal human saw himself reflected in the waters
of the world and wished to inhabit it, hence had intercourse with Nature, who gave birth
to all other humans. A limited few humans retain elements of mind (\textit{nous}), or intellect,
which will allow them to become divine. This androgynous primal human is himself
given the power to create, and brings forth seven androgynous demiurges, who also
participate in creation. These beings, described in Corpus Hermeticum 1, perform the
crucial act of ensouling humans with mind, or \textit{nous}. As Corpus Hermeticum 1:16
describes this event, “Nature…brought forth seven men corresponding to the natures of
the seven powers, beyond gender and sublime.”\textsuperscript{29} The Hermetic creator god and seven
demiurges would go on to play an important role in evolutionary esotericisms,
particularly that developed by Blavatsky.

Like Plato’s dialogues, the Corpus Hermeticum gives contradictory views as to
the nature of the soul and the material world. Corpus Hermeticum 10 states, “man is
corrug as he both can be moved and is mortal,” while the twelfth text states, “Every

\textsuperscript{28} See DeConick 2016a, 80–81.
\textsuperscript{29} Corp. herm. 1.16, Salaman, Van Oyen, and Wharton 1999, 20.
living creature is immortal by virtue of Nous.” And the Definitions tell us that “God is in heaven, and heaven in the world.”

Much of the Hermetic salvation scheme echoes common Platonist themes, in that salvation lies in identification with “real,” or spiritual things: “May the man endowed with Nous recognise that he is immortal, that desire is the cause of death, and may he come to know all things that are.” Humans can come to this knowledge through being devout, noble, and pure, through merciful and pious living, as well as shutting down the senses.

Like Plato, the authors of the Hermetica were also uncomfortable with lust and sexual desire. Although they saw procreation as necessary, they thought that those who want to be free from mortality must control lust. The androgynous state is described as preceding the gendered state. The first book of the Corpus Hermeticum states that there were seven androgyne generations following the creation, after which humans became male and female: “On completion of the cycle, the bond of all was loosed according to the will of God, for all living beings, which were of both genders, were parted asunder at the same time as Man and became in turn male and female.” The implication is that the androgyneous state is more perfect than the gendered, and thus a waystation on the return to divinity.

But controlling the passions is only the first step. Like Christian and Jewish

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30 Corp. herm. 10.12, Salaman, Van Oyen, and Wharton 1999, 48; Corp. herm. 12.18, Salaman, Van Oyen, and Wharton 1999, 63.
31 Definitions 3.1, Mahé 1999, 111.
32 Corp. herm. 1.18, Salaman, Van Oyen, and Wharton 1999, 21. Note: as reviewed later, some translations render “desire” in this passage “love of body,” and it does not necessarily refer to carnal desire.
33 Corp. herm. 1:22.
34 See DeConick 2016a, 87.
35 Corp. herm. 1.18, Salaman, Van Oyen, and Wharton 1999, 21.
religion, the Corpus Hermeticum stresses the importance of humility and praise for the deity, such as the singing of hymns. But unlike those religions, it places more emphasis on human effort. Assimilation to God takes place through *noësis*, which by Greco-Roman times did not mean just philosophy, but a more intuitive or imaginative mental process. This process, as argued by Jean-Pierre Mahé, “is both spiritual light and enlightenment. It can be realised by special philosophical disciplines and essentially through mystic initiation,” exercised through meditation, work and effort.\(^{36}\)

The Hermetica espouse both bipartite and tripartite “anthropologies,” or visions of human nature.\(^{37}\) In other words, some texts saw humans as being soul and body, while others viewed the human as body, soul, and spirit (*nous*). The tension between these two visions will become relevant as we review in upcoming chapters the work of the Theosophical Society, which struggled to harmonize the Hermetic systems.

As in most emanationist systems, creation is meant to return to its Creator. Though divinization was practiced before death, the ultimate “way back” is found after “dissolution of the body” as the human ascends “through the harmony of the cosmos” and relinquishes human qualities such as deceit and greed. Making their way to the “eighth sphere,” heaven-bound humans “ascend to the father and they surrender themselves to the powers, and becoming the powers they are merged in God.”\(^{38}\)

The “spheres” of the Hermetica are part of a common ancient schema of the universe, in which the earth was believed to be surrounded by concentric spheres relating to the planets, and an outer sphere related to the fixed stars. It was believed that the soul

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\(^{36}\) 1999, 102–3.
\(^{37}\) See Roig Lanzillotta, 2017.
\(^{38}\) Corp. herm. 1.26, Salaman, Van Oyen and Wharton, 23.
originated either outside these spheres or in the realm of the stars, and descended down through the spheres, and later progressed out of them, a process of emanation and return. The number of spheres, also known as heavens or levels, varies depending on the scheme, but they corresponded with initiation and progress, and are an important part of the chain of being metaphor.

Another important and unique aspect of Hermetic traditions is that they declare that humans participate in creation, and that soul requires life in a body in order to become divine. The mode of redemption prescribed by the Hermetica is, according to David Litwa, when souls recognize “their co-essentiality with God.” The Definitions imply that perfection can only be achieved by development while incarnate, and state, “Just as the body is marvelously moulded in the womb, likewise the soul in the body.” The body molds the soul as the womb molds the body. In other words, humans must first live in the world in order to become deified, though escape from the world is the goal. The idea that God needs the world as much as the world needs God resonates with the principle of plenitude as identified by Lovejoy.

The Corpus Hermeticum describes becoming God as going through a series of “transformations,” which suggest the links in the great chain of being. “Those which are reptiles are changed into aquatic creatures, aquatic creatures into those of the earth, those of the earth into fowls of the air, the air-borne into man. The human souls which gain immortality are transformed into spirits and thence to the choruses of the gods…. This is

39 2013, 92.
41 “Just as the body is marvelously moulded in the womb, likewise the soul in the body” (Def. 7:2, Mahé 1999, 113).
the most perfect glory of the soul.”

Key takeaways from the Hermetic corpus, then, are that the soul begins its transformation into divinity by living in the world, that divine humans assisted in creation, that God is in the world, and that divinization is a process of contemplation and imagination, combined with work and effort, which is begun on earth and continued after death. The Hermetic manuscripts were largely lost in Europe until Renaissance times, when they were translated and had a remarkable impact on developing concepts of human destiny.

**Table 3: Hermetic Ideas about Divinization**

1. The soul begins its transformation into divinity by living in the world.
2. God is in the world.
3. Seven androgynous demigods assisted in creation.
4. Divinization is a process begun on earth through contemplation and imagination and continued after death.
5. Progress towards godhood proceeds through levels, heavens or spheres, often by a process of initiation.
6. The first created humans were androgynous.
7. Sexual reproduction is necessary.
8. Desire is the cause of death and ultimate salvation lies outside the body.

**Gnosticism**

Parallel with Hermetic traditions in Hellenistic times were a variety of traditions that have been labelled “gnostic.” These traditions also influenced esotericism and especially Blavatsky. Gnostic sects developed both inside and outside of Judaism and Christianity, often combining philosophical and religious ideas but united by their emphasis on salvation as direct experiential knowledge of God, and participation in the divine

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42 Corp. herm. 10.7–8, Salaman, Van Oyen and Wharton, 47.
nature.\textsuperscript{43} Gnosticism defined itself in opposition to Yahweh, God of the Hebrew scriptures, who was seen as a demiurge, a lesser god. The true creator God was outside the world. The demiurge could then be blamed for all of the flaws and injustice in the world, while the transcendent God remained above it.

Gnostic systems, like the Hermetic (as well as the Neoplatonic, reviewed next), also viewed the world as a series of spheres, outside of which was the ultimate transcendent God. They tended to have a more negative view of the human body than did the Hermetica, however. For gnostics, only a small elite might have the \textit{nous} or \textit{pneuma} that would allow them to progress outside the created world. The body was in general seen as a hindrance, or even as evil, though gnostic systems differed in their attitudes towards the body and procreation.

Declared heretical by the Church Fathers, gnosticism was wiped out and its scriptures largely lost until 1945, when a collection of texts was discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. However, some gnostic texts had been available beforehand, both through passages quoted in Christian polemics as well as gnostic manuscripts that had surfaced earlier. In 1772, a manuscript known as the Askew Codex was purchased in England. It contained four books of gnostic lore, commonly known as Pistis Sophia, and was studied by Blavatsky. It describes techniques for escaping the material world, including rituals, prayers, and magical incantations, and is generally considered to be a late gnostic composition.

Gnostic, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic systems all incorporated the idea of initiation, rituals, and soul purification or healing through modalities that have some resonance with

\textsuperscript{43} See DeConick 2016a.
therapeutic techniques advocated by modern-day evolutionists. As argued by April DeConick in her 2016 *The Gnostic New Age*, these rituals often involved guided ascent analogous to a “shamanic soul flight,” and prefigured contemporary interest in religion as healing.⁴⁴ For the gnostics, ritual techniques were used to induce ecstatic experience, and believed to purify, recover, and integrate the lost pieces of soul or spirit.⁴⁵ Gnostics also simulated and practiced for the ultimate soul journey through the spheres, which would take place after death, using modalities like chanting, sensory deprivation, and ritual drama.⁴⁶ DeConick argues that gnostic initiation differed from other initiation ceremonies of the Greek mystery religions in that it developed a therapeutic orientation. The conclusion of this dissertation will survey the incorporation of similar techniques in twentieth-century religious evolutionism, including the modern New Age.

**TABLE 4: Gnostic Ideas about Divinization**

1. The creator god is an evil demiurge.
2. Salvation lies in reunion with the transcendent God outside the spheres of the created universe.
3. The body and the material world are evil or a hindrance.
4. Practicing for after-death ascent includes ritual, drama, and chanting.
5. Salvation may have a therapeutic orientation.

**Neoplatonism**

Plato had avoided setting forth dogmas about the soul, preferring, according to T.M. Robinson, “open-ended dialogue.”⁴⁷ But in the second through fourth centuries CE, Neoplatonic teachers synthesized a religious system that built upon both Plato and

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⁴⁴ 2016a, 85.
⁴⁵ See DeConick 2016a, 168–70.
⁴⁶ 2016a, 175–94.
⁴⁷ 2000, 55.
Aristotle. They were also influenced by Neo-Pythagoreanism, Greek mystery cults, Stoicism, and the Hermetica. Their system contained the first developed conception of the great chain of being, and Lovejoy writes that although some components of the great chain came from Plato and Aristotle, “it is in Neoplatonism that they first appear as fully organized into a coherent general scheme of things.”

Emanationism in Neoplatonism meant that all of creation emanated from and will return to the One, its original cause. The One had become the ultimate ontological category for Plotinus, and performed a function similar to that of Plato’s Good. But it was just one of three divine principles, or hypostases—the One, Intelligence (nous), and the divine Soul—whose relationship to the human soul was debated. The world is created or ensouled by the emanations that overflow from one hypostasis to the other. This imagery provides the foundation of emanationism in Western thought, which is linked with Lovejoy’s principle of continuity, and will be seen to have widespread reverberations in the systems reviewed below. Emanationism maintains a fundamental tension with Christian orthodoxy, which attempted to erect high barriers between God and the world, primarily through Augustine’s doctrine that the soul was not created from divine substance but out of nothing, ex nihilo.

The theological goal of Neoplatonism is the return of the human soul to the One through a process of fusion. This fusion is described in different ways, but generally speaking, according to Plotinus, the best-known Neoplatonic thinker, it preserves the self while transforming and unifying it. Methods for return to the One differed from teacher to teacher. For Plotinus, living a moral and contemplative life through philosophy alone

48 1964, 61.
49 Corrigan 2005, 34.
was enough. But his view of contemplation and philosophical practice included what would today be considered religious components such as invocation and the awakening to “a higher form of seeing,” in Kevin Corrigan’s words.\(^5^0\)

His successor Porphyry (c. 234-c. 305 CE) taught a combination of methods, with philosophy plus theurgy, literally, “God-work,” which incorporates visualization and ritual magic in a broader picture of human engagement with the divine. Living as they did in a world in which Christianity was becoming more prominent, the Neoplatonists sought to fuse philosophy and religion. Porphyry equated salvation with the return to the gods, the goal of Greek religion. A third prominent Neoplatonic teacher, Iamblichus (c. 240-325 CE), taught that only theurgy combined with the assistance of divine beings such as angels could lead to salvation.

The three teachers differed on the nature of the soul, with Plotinus taking a more pessimistic view and postulating that the human soul was divided into a lower animal and a higher divine portion, of which only the higher soul included the divine essence. Later teachers allowed that the entire soul included divine elements. The question of the nature of the soul preoccupied Blavatsky, who proposed a three-part psychology in her early work *Isis Unveiled*, and a seven-part psychology in her mature work.

Neoplatonic systems were extremely complicated and often contradictory. One can view Plotinus as an artist attempting to create a coherent picture out of the palette of antiquity but ending up with competing styles and blank spaces. He certainly applied principles of conceptual blending to the clashing domains from which he drew. For example, he described the hypostasis *Soul as both* indivisible and divisible—divisible

\(^5^0\) 2005, 30.
Prophet: Evolution Esotericized

because it is divided among material bodies and indivisible because, as H.J. Blumenthal describes it, “all of it is in each part.”\(^{51}\) He also described the world as ensouled, following Plato, and as having one nature. Yet souls differ, “a function,” as Blumenthal puts it, “of their involvement with the body.”\(^{52}\) The soul affects the body as heat affects air, but retains its independence. The body, in opposition to ascetic systems, should not be denied but rather supported and its health maintained. Nevertheless, Plotinus described matter as evil, but he used *evil* in the sense of poverty, lack, and an indeterminate quality.\(^{53}\)

Plotinus updated and transformed the Platonic conception of the soul, and incorporated insights about the nervous system from the contemporary physician Galen. But he affirmed, with Plato, that the seat of sensation is in the head.\(^{54}\) Plotinus also postulated a higher self, or man, which coincides with or emerges from the rational faculty, as Blumenthal describes it, “the meeting place of the sensible and intelligible worlds,” and is “a being who must live in this world but whose thoughts and aspirations are directed beyond it.”\(^{55}\) Hae Young Seong has argued that for Plotinus, it is precisely the dual nature of the soul that gives humans the capacity to choose association with divine or animal nature. He cites Plotinus’s description of the human as placed, according to the Enneads, “between gods and beasts,” with, in Seong’s words, a “dual capacity” to be attached to the world above or below.\(^{56}\) As Corrigan describes it, for Plotinus, the soul maintains a foothold in both Plato’s intelligible and sensible worlds, an “amphibious

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\(^{51}\) Blumenthal 1971, 14.  
\(^{52}\) Blumenthal 1971, 15.  
\(^{54}\) Blumenthal 1971, 75.  
\(^{55}\) Blumenthal 1971, 111.  
\(^{56}\) 2008, 165, citing *Enn.* 3.2.8.9–12.
traveler between these two worlds of eternity and time.”

For Plotinus, the intelligible world occasionally seems to interpenetrate the physical world. Here we see the elements of what has often been called an amphibious theory of the human soul—as living in both the material and immaterial worlds. The human would later be called the “middle link” in the chain, a connection between matter and spirit. The higher self of Plotinus provided a plausible explanation for how this might come to pass, a potential bridge over the gap between eternity and time, and between intelligence and soul, between matter and spirit.

But for Plotinus, material substance was not what moderns might think of as matter. For him, light was immaterial, and sense perception depended upon a “sympathy” between beings that permitted correspondences between the world below and above, which was linked by a “material pneuma,” in the words of Blumenthal, almost like the nineteenth-century concept of ether. We will see echoes of these attempts to redefine material and spiritual according to scientific developments of the day in the nineteenth-century debates over materialism.

A final point of discussion regarding Neoplatonism concerns teleology and free will. In a system that relies upon return by the same road upon which one had arrived, it is difficult to imagine a role for free will. Nevertheless, Plotinus worked hard to maintain human freedom. As Corrigan writes, he “emphasized individual, free agency and the compatibility of providence with both freedom and fate.” But he also believed that we are unaware of much of what may be occurring in our soul, and developed concepts that

58 1971, 137.
59 2005, 44.
sound like the modern unconscious and preconscious.

Laura Westra argues that “freedom represents the central notion in the philosophy of Plotinus,” with thinking grounded in Stoicism, involving the concepts of providence, necessity, and fate.60 The rational principle establishes universal laws governing human capacity to act, and the ability to “act and to do ‘noble actions’ by their own nature’ and to be a free and independent principle,” as Westra explains it, “is simply a manifestation of one of the laws that govern everything.”61 Far from resolving tensions between theological determinism and free will, Plotinus provided plenty of ambiguity for future philosophers and theologians, both inside and outside Christianity, who would struggle to defend free will alongside divine foreknowledge. For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to know that Neoplatonic views of the soul were complex but that a more or less coherent view of the soul and salvation emerged.

TABLE 5: NEOPLATONIC IDEAS ABOUT THE SOUL AND DIVINIZATION

1. Soul and body mutually interpenetrate and influence one another.
2. Souls came from a transcendent God and are meant to fuse with the divine after death though retaining individuality.
3. Humans can perform various acts while alive to facilitate the soul’s return, including contemplation, invocation, and incantation.
4. The human contains a “higher self,” which may interpenetrate both material and spiritual worlds (amphibious metaphor).
5. The body is important to the soul’s development and should be kept healthy.
6. Humans may be transformed into angels or other divine beings after death.

60 Westra 2002, 125.
Neoplatonism, as Lovejoy points out, greatly developed and expanded the Western cultural metaphor of the great chain of being. The chain was seen as a representation of the overflowing emanation of divine goodness. According to Lovejoy, Neoplatonism fuses the principles of plenitude, continuity, and gradation. The fifth-century writer Macrobius, summarizing Plotinus, uses the metaphor of a series of mirrors as well as a chain to describe how Soul infills all things:

Since this single radiance illumines all and is reflected in each, as a single face might be reflected in many mirrors placed in a series...the attentive observer will discover a connection of parts, from the Supreme God down to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without a break. And this is Homer’s golden chain, which God, he says, bade hang down from heaven to earth.\(^{62}\)

In describing the “golden chain” as “Homer’s,” Macrobius is actually referring to a golden rope described in a passage from the Iliad in which Zeus declares that nature is dependent upon a golden rope hanging from heaven, which he can raise or lower at will. However, the rope itself clearly was an inspiration and even justification for the development of the metaphor over time. The metaphor is not consistent—it sometimes seems to be a ladder on which individuals move down from and return up towards a source, and sometimes a chain in which each type or species plays an appointed but static

\(^{62}\) Macrobius’s *Commentary on Scipio*, quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 63.
role, connected to those above and below. A corollary to the notion of the human as middle link is the idea that there are beings both above and below humans in the chain. The metaphor was both durable and flexible in its ability to structure changing attitudes towards the place of human beings in relation to animals and to the divine.

A discussion of the great chain in antiquity would not be complete without a mention of Pseudo-Dionysius, the author of several works that were believed in antiquity, during the Middle Ages, and through the Renaissance to have been written by Dionysius, the disciple of the apostle Paul described in Acts 17:16–34. Although the works were actually written around 500 CE, they were for centuries revered almost as scripture. After being first translated from Greek into Latin in the ninth century, the writings became popular in Western Christianity. They influenced esotericism, mysticism, and Protestant Christianity, even after doubts began to be expressed as to their author’s identity.63 They are quoted by Renaissance humanists (who knew them as Neoplatonic but still revered them) and by Blavatsky.

Pseudo-Dionysius knew and used the writings of the Neoplatonic teacher Proclus (412–485 CE), though he was also a profound student of the Greek fathers, especially the Cappadocians. As a student of Neoplatonism, Dionysius further refined the metaphor of a chain as a way of integrating human and divine effort, when he described how goodness proceeds from God:

Imagine a great shining chain hanging downward from the heights of heaven to the world below. We grab hold of it with one hand and then another, and

63 Froehlich 1987, 34, 43.
we seem to be pulling it down toward us. Actually it is already there on the heights and down below and instead of pulling it to us we are being lifted upward to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams.\textsuperscript{64}

This description by Pseudo-Dionysius was available throughout the Middle Ages and used until the eighteenth century to elaborate and modify of the great chain of being metaphor.

Pseudo-Dionysius incorporated enough of the Neoplatonic vision into his Christianity that he presented a sort of pull-push vision of salvation that could later be used to defend human agency and counter narratives of salvation by faith or grace alone. In his work \textit{The Celestial Hierarchy}, he advised that the supplicant should call to Jesus (the Light) to “lift upward and to unify those beings for which it has a providential responsibility.” The ray of Light extending from the Father then “grants to creatures the power to rise up, so far as they may, toward itself and it unifies them by way of its own simplified unity.”\textsuperscript{65} Pseudo-Dionysius was also able to describe divinization in more express terms than the Bible. For example, he wrote that one who tries “as hard as possible to imitate God…deserves to be called divine.”\textsuperscript{66} Among the ways in which humans could “rise up,” according to Pseudo-Dionysius, was through ritual or liturgy.

Pseudo-Dionysius also contributed another potential nuance to the great chain metaphor by using it to preserve a conservative and static depiction of authority in which the hierarchies of the church mirror the angelic hierarchies: “Order and rank here below are a sign of the harmonious ordering toward the divine realm.” But these angelic

\textsuperscript{64} \S680C, \textit{The Divine Names}, in Luibheid et al 1987, 68.
\textsuperscript{65} \S121B, \textit{Celest. Hie.}, in Luibheid et al 1987, 146, emphasis added.
hierarchies also participate in the process of transforming the lower links in the chain so that humans can be “made godlike.”

While reaffirming the traditional Platonic association of animals with the senses and humans with intellect, Pseudo-Dionysius also declared the interrelatedness of the sensual and intelligible worlds. Things that are in the world, even the senses, are analogies to divine things. The author went on to compare the parts of the human body with the powers of heaven, and with the four creatures from Ezekiel 1 that have four-sided faces—the man, the lion, the ox, and the eagle. The parts and qualities of animals thus become divine qualities and parts, linked in a chain of imperceptible gradations.

For example, animal desire becomes “that longing felt by the angels in the presence of God; and indeed, to put the matter briefly, all the feelings and all the various parts of the irrational animals uplift us to immaterial conceptions and to the unifying powers of the heavenly beings.” Material forms can thus “be used, not unfittingly, with regards to heavenly beings.” As we will see, nineteenth-century evolutionary esotericists also assumed a mixed attitude towards sensuality and animals, affirming human unity and continuity with animal nature and passion when it could serve a purpose, while also denying the connection when necessary to defend man’s unique status.

**Table 6: Pseudo-Dionysius on the Soul and the Great Chain**

1. Human efforts toward salvation receive divine assistance in response.
2. God gives humans the power to rise up and become divine.
3. Higher links in the chain reflect God’s Light to those below.
4. Parts and qualities of animals are analogous to divine qualities.
5. Sensual (material) and intelligible (spiritual) worlds are related by analogy.

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6. Feelings are analogs of heavenly powers.

_The Great Chain in Medieval Christianity_

Christian theology, though incorporating ideas from Neoplatonism, made its own innovations to resolve new contradictions it identified in the chain metaphor. Dante used the imagery substantially in his Divine Comedy, but carefully. It would have been problematic for him to directly link humans with divine beings given that the faith predicates itself upon a wide gulf between creator and creation. The principle of plenitude, with its suggestion that all creatures are an overflowing of divine goodness, could quickly become heretical.

Nevertheless, medieval Christianity did incorporate Neoplatonic concepts—for example, the way down was also the way up, and transition towards the divine was seen as gradual. However, these ideas introduced unresolvable complexities into the chain metaphor, according to Lovejoy, who wrote that “the parallel between the descending and the ascending process was little more than verbal. The scale of being conceived as a ladder by which humans might mount to beatitude was not literally composed of the same steps as the scale of being conceived as the series of natural forms.”\(^70\) Contemplation of the divine creation did not include contemplation of lower forms of life, which were seen as only steps to be “spurned and transcended.”\(^71\) However, the metaphor continued to be refined and developed, in spite of the difficulties in conceiving of a chain that was also a ladder.

\(^{70}\) Lovejoy 1964, 89–90.
\(^{71}\) Lovejoy 1964, 90.
A further complexity in the medieval chain came also from the biological side. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) argued that through the principle of continuity, each genus contained something of the creatures above and below it. This idea led to refinement of ideas about the nature of human beings as a middle link between heaven and earth. The Catholic theologian Albert the Great (c. 1200-1280) had observed that there were intermediate creatures linking all types of animals, citing Aristotle. Aquinas speculated on the nature of man as composite, existing on the borderline between the visible and invisible, corporeal and incorporeal worlds. For Aquinas, as quoted by Lovejoy, the human has “aequaliter complexionatum...in equal degree the characters of both classes, since it attains to the lowest member of the class above bodies, namely, the human soul, which is at the bottom of the series of intellectual beings—and is said, therefore to be the horizon and boundary line of things corporeal and incorporeal.”

Although overlooked by Lovejoy, the German theologian Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328) also contributed to an important transformation of the great chain metaphor—the beginnings of an inversion, whereby the lower became the higher, and the divine was embedded in creation, flowing out of the ground instead of descending from on high. Eckhart’s key teaching, which skated dangerously close to heresy, was on the identity of the soul with God. He described the intellect as the “temple of God.”

Eckhart, who lived during an era that Bernard McGinn has been described as a ‘Dionysian Renaissance,’” took up and transformed the dialectical Christian Neoplatonism invented by Pseudo-Dionysius. He was also fond of analogy—humans

72 1964, 79.
74 McGinn 2001, 177.
contain divine qualities that forever hanker after their source, becoming more hungry the more they eat. McGinn describes Eckhart as having stood Aquinas on his head when he reversed the importance of understanding in the divine nature. Eckhart wrote, “It does not now seem to me that God understands because he exists, but rather that he exists because he understands.” The implication is Hermetic—the divine comes to know itself through creation.

Eckhart’s “mysticism of the ground” subverted the chain of being by making the divine more immediately accessible, although ultimately unknowable. *Ground (grunt)* is a German word which, as McGinn describes it, possesses a “semantic richness,” which can mean “what is inmost, hidden, most proper to a being…that is, its essence.” Its use was, McGinn argues, “a response to a widespread yearning to express a new view of how God becomes one with the human person.” *Ground* can mean both the depths of the soul and the depths of God. Eckhart maintained that “God’s ground and the soul’s ground is one ground.” McGinn calls Eckhart’s ground “a master metaphor for exploring the…fused-identity, of God and the soul.”

Eckhart’s metaphor of creation as *flowing forth* out of the divine and then *flowing back* or “breaking through” is a more fluid expression of the relationship between human and divine than is a chain or ladder. Likewise, Eckhart linked creation with fertility and maternity, in that the divine Nothingness of the ground gives birth to God.

This theology prefigured the more immanentist philosophies of Paracelsus and Böhme,
which were hugely influential on the esotericisms we will be studying.

*The Revival of Hermetic Traditions and Neoplatonism in the Italian Renaissance*

Two major figures of the Italian Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), engaged in a syncretic project that claimed as its goal the return to Plato, and even established in Florence a renewed reverence for the Platonic Academy. They built upon a syncretic foundation already established by the Italian scholar Petrarch (1304-1374), Nicolas of Cusa (1401-1464) and others, which promoted a new dynamic view of the human to combat static medieval scholasticism. Ficino and Pico revered not only Plato but the Neoplatonists, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Hermes Trismegistus alongside the Bible. Ficino believed that the Hermetic writings had been composed by a contemporary of Moses as early as the thirteenth century BCE. But his view of Moses was hardly orthodox—not only was he the author of the Pentateuch but also the developer of what was then being elevated as Christian Kabbalah, a Christianized form of Jewish mystical writings and practices.

Ficino and Pico sought to demonstrate the harmony of the pagan and secret Jewish teachings with Christian doctrine in order to promote Christianity with the intellectuals of their day. They used the term *prisca theologia* to suggest that the ancient figures had taught the same “early” or “ancient” theology. However, Pico also hoped to synthesize *all* of philosophy and religion, including Aristotle alongside Plato, and more recent thinkers as well, from Arab philosophers to Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. So theirs was very much a contemporary project in the guise of a restoration, and it contributed to the later evolutionary esotericisms.

Renaissance humanism is usually remembered for its emphasis on human
autonomy and its incorporation of the material world into salvation, with its portrayal of the liberal arts as a way to God, and the contemplation and reproduction of beauty and nature as contributing to the growth and harmony of the soul. During the mid-twentieth century, some historians promoted a view of Renaissance humanists as proto-moderns who advanced science against superstition. Pico’s famous “Oration on the Dignity of Man” was praised as supporting the secular 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, Ficino and Pico were neither modern scientists nor Enlightenment figures. Their quest was driven by both esoteric and religious beliefs and they appealed to the great chain metaphor as a descriptor of man’s place in the world. They refined the relationship between heaven and earth, particularly the idea of the human as middle link, or mediator.

Pico’s famous Oration actually begins with a quotation from Hermes. Pico wrote the oration as an introduction to his nine-hundred theses, a set of propositions that he hoped to debate before the church hierarchy. As Pico understood it, human “dignity” was at least partly related to our location midway in the great chain of being. Referring to the view of “Abdallah the Saracen” that “there is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man,” Pico quoted in proof the Hermetic text Asclepius: “This opinion is seconded by Mercury’s saying: ‘A great miracle, Asclepius, is man.’”

Pico did not consider occupation of the middle link to be the chief reason for human superiority. For Pico, man is made great not only by his position but by his “indeterminate” quality, which inspired Pico to address man in the voice of the creator, declaring, “you, constrained by no limits, may determine your nature for yourself.

according to your own free will…neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the
free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you
prefer.”

In spite of this modern-sounding description of human autonomy, Pico continued
in a more Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Christian vein, with reference to Pseudo-
Dionysius, to describe the destiny of the soul. In Pico’s system, the soul was meant to be
cleansed, illumined, and perfected. This was to take place through purification of
emotions and receiving “the light of natural philosophy” along with the perfection of “the
knowledge of things divine.” His chain is a ladder by which the soul is meant to be
illuminated, a ladder stretching “from the lowest earth to the highest Heavens and that is
marked by a series of many rungs.”

Although a popular view during the twentieth century was that Pico was a
champion of human free will, conflicting views emerge in Pico’s work. While
suggesting “free” will, Pico’s Oration also implies that the will is blind and dependent
upon study of philosophy, although he saw an interpenetration of will and intellect as the
soul rose up the ladder. Attempting to avoid the Pelagian heresy—that humans can earn
their own salvation—Pico also upheld both God’s omnipotence and benevolence. His
compromise, argues Stephen Farmer, focused on human “co-action” with God, a
common theological concept. But Pico’s compromise nudged the debate ever so slightly
in the direction of human autonomy.

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82 §22, Borghesi, Papio and Riva 2012, 117n17, 117.
83 §70.
84 §72, Borghesi, Papio and Riva 2012, 143.
85 §74, Borghesi, Papio and Riva 2012, 143.
87 1998, 192.
Ficino, whose Neoplatonism is described by Christopher Celenza as “post-Plotinian” or “non-Plotinian,” also believed that humans had a choice in whether to ascend in the scale of being, and that intellectual rigor, discipline, and ritual could promote that ascent. Ficino’s view of the human as controller and manipulator of matter was, as Celenza puts it, “dependent on the notion of sympathies in the universe between entities at various ontological levels…. This signaled a view of the human soul’s capacity that was different from that of Plotinus, at once humbler and, paradoxically, more ambitious.” It was humble in the sense that it agreed to an “essential disconnection” from the divine but ambitious in the sense that “it suggested we could manipulate the natural world to our advantage.”

It was Ficino, according to Charles Trinkaus, who “developed the fullest and most far-reaching exposition of the ideal of human autonomy in the Renaissance.” Ficino described the human as one who both “imitates the works of divine nature and perfects and corrects those of lower nature.” Ficino called man “the “god” of animals, elements and materials based on his domination over the earth. Thus Ficino played an important part in the process by which humans could be conceived of in later centuries as not only imitating but replacing God. Eventually, as humanism developed, Trinkaus comments, the divine ideal of Platonism was replaced by man himself. Nevertheless, Ficino’s marginally more positive view of the body did not negate his belief that the body is ultimately to be transcended, and that permanent divine reality lies outside the material

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88 2002, 73.
89 Celenza 2002, 87.
90 1986, 142.
91 Quoted in Trinkaus 1986, 149.
92 Trinkaus 1986, 149.
world.

Nevertheless, the increased emphasis on the material world and the body facilitated the development of a therapeutic approach to salvation. Ficino, whose father was a doctor, “habitually” adopted, according to Michael J. B. Allen, “a physiopsychological rather than a radically ethicoreligious approach to man’s unhappiness and failings.” Ficino did not deny “the reality of sin” but tended to “ignore it,” Allen comments. 93 In his De Vita, Ficino defended natural magic and its role in maintaining the health of the body, and also promoted the use of precious stones as healing talismans, along with music and astrology. As summarized by Celenza, for Ficino, “the magus is like a farmer, practicing an art as natural, patterned and subject to the seasons as that of farming.” 94 Thus, though rooted in emanationism, Renaissance humanism also began to bring aspects of the chain down to earth by analogy, presaging the German philosophers who began to develop a new view of God in nature.

\textbf{Table 7: Renaissance Humanist Innovations Regarding Human and Divine Nature}

1. \textit{Prisca theologia:} the ancients agreed on the nature of man and God and these views are being recovered and restored.
2. The arts and contemplation of beauty can be a means to salvation.
3. Humans can choose their own nature, moving up or down the scale of being.
4. As microcosms reflecting the divine, humans can manipulate the material world through natural magic.
5. Imbalance, rather than sin, is the source of illness, and the \textit{magus} can conduct therapeutic rituals and supply talismans to promote health.

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93 1984, 183.
94 2002, 97.
In the sixteenth century, a variety of systems arose in Germany that expressed a more immanent philosophy of nature. They incorporated alchemy and other esoteric themes, adapted earlier metaphors of divinization and contributed to the development of systems known as Christian theosophy. During this period, the focus of esoteric authority shifted from pagan philosophy to nature itself. Since Blavatsky patterned herself after some of these systems and co-opted the name theosophy, and since the same movement also deeply influenced narratives about mesmerism and magnetism to which Myers and his collaborators responded, these systems of divine immanence in nature are an essential part of the thought world of nineteenth-century evolutionary esotericisms.

Paracelsus (1493-1541) is a vital way-station in any consideration of religion as therapy (a cornerstone of many evolutionary esotericisms). He was a Swiss-German physician, born Theophrastus von Hohenheim, who took the name Paracelsus. He was a botanist, philosopher, visionary, and astrologer who wanted to reform both medicine and theology, believed physicians could learn from artisans and metalworkers, and opposed reliance on ancient authorities. He advocated the compounding of local herbs as opposed to exotic foreign medicines, and supported a “fresh spirit of enquiry,” as described by Charles Webster.\textsuperscript{95} Paracelsus based his theology on a three-part anthropology, rooted in the division of the universe into the heavens, the earth, and the human as microcosm. Building upon medieval alchemy but altering its meaning radically, he settled upon

\textsuperscript{95} 2008, 13.
mercury, sulphur, and salt as primary principles and metaphors for the essential human qualities.

He was by no means a modern scientist. Though he rejected the Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance with which he overlapped chronologically, he nevertheless promoted Kabbalah, magic, and astrology as being compatible with true Christian doctrine.\(^96\) Among his innovations were that magic was accessible to all, not only elite philosophers and magi, as the Florentine Neoplatonists had argued. For him, the heavens did not emit a symphony (as Ficino had described them) but rather sounds akin to the noise of water in nature, brooks, or wind.

In spite of his criticism of Neoplatonism, Paracelsus adopted and adapted some of its language and metaphors, including its medical aspects. Walter Pagel argued that Paracelsus was more reliant on Neoplatonism than he admitted, and identified Renaissance Neoplatonism as the source of Paracelsus’s identification of the hidden powers of nature.\(^97\) In elaborating on the great chain tradition, Paracelsus was constrained by his Protestant culture to support the doctrine of creation out of nothing and separation between creator and creation. But in practice, his theories reflect emanationist systems. His ideas were also rooted in the religious and political conflicts of his day, which centered around the persecuted Anabaptist sect. Although he did not join an Anabaptist congregation, he shared their anti-elitism and emphasis on personal experience of the divine.

Though his populist attitude resonates with modern sensibilities, much of his

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\(^96\) For him, Kabbalah was more a form of applied magic built upon the authority of Moses than the classical Kabbalah. See Webster 2008.

thought would seem bigoted or fantastic today. An apocalyptic and visionary thinker, he believed a restoration of ancient and more perfect time was at hand. He interpreted new diseases like the plague and syphilis as divine punishment for human misconduct in polluting the macrocosm. But, although many of his medical innovations would be dismissed today as unscientific, his association of disease with imagination and his argument for a “spiritual dimension of health,” in Webster’s words,98 present an early example of a mind-body explanation for disease.

Like the Renaissance humanists, Paracelsus built upon the esoteric and Neoplatonic theory of correspondences between man as microcosm and world as macrocosm. He saw mutual influence between higher and lower links in the chain of being, similar also to Ficino’s view that the macrocosm and microcosm “existed in partnership,” as Webster describes it—or, in Paracelsus’s words, had “received one another.”99 Each human was thus a small world, a duplication of the cosmos, which placed stress, according to Webster, on “the analogy between the aspirations to salvation and health.” Repelling disease and repelling evil were the same thing, and nature became a source of healing. Paracelsus used the metaphor of magnetism to describe the action of herbs and attempted to explain the miracles of pilgrimage by magnetism and naturalistic forces. Paracelsus’s appeal to harmony between microcosm and macrocosm underlay his homeopathic principle that like was healed by like and his presentation of Light of Nature as a hypostatic divine principle.100 Paracelsus sometimes described this Light as a “personal protector…or domestic god or angel,” which gave people new insights and

98 2008, 165.
99 2008, 143.
100 2008, 154.
power to see the future, according to Webster.\textsuperscript{101}

Another of Paracelsus’s elaborations on Renaissance Neoplatonism was his idea of the astral body, which he also called the \textit{spirit}. The astral body was conceived of as an envelope, which the Neoplatonists had described as a vehicle (\textit{ochema}), or chariot, in which the soul travelled, having borrowed it from the stars on descent and returning it to them upon ascent. Paracelsus used the term \textit{spirit} in a sense referring to, as Pagel describes it, “the deeper strata of the personality, the sphere of will and willful imagination.” The spirit teaches through dreams and the “Light of Nature.”\textsuperscript{102} While drawing upon Neoplatonic ideas, Paracelsus introduced the notion of dynamic processes within nature itself, which became important to later “vitalist” conceptions of life and healing, and contributed to the therapeutic components of future evolutionary esotericisms.

The German cobbler and visionary Jacob Böhme (c. 1575–1624) built upon the developing framework of the divine in nature, including that of Paracelsus, and ultimately transformed it into Christian theosophy. Böhme is often thought of as a simple mystic since his insights arose from visionary experiences. However, his mature ideas betray multiple influences and the development of concepts over time. As pointed out by biographer Andrew Weeks, Böhme’s first illuminatory experience occurred in 1600 but he did not begin writing down or publishing his visions until twelve years afterwards. They unfolded through his writing process, which reflects, according to Weeks, an evolution in his thought as well as the “conditions of his period and region.” Weeks calls for a “less fanciful image of the plebian intellectual,” recontextualizing him in his own

\textsuperscript{101} 2008, 155.
\textsuperscript{102} 1985, 133.
“Middle European setting.”

Among the events influencing Böhme were the Counter-Reformation, accompanied by persecutions of heretical Christians, as well as the heresy trial and burning of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), a philosopher-monk who promoted esoteric ideas. Böhme also viewed himself as a Hermetic syncretist in the tradition of Pico, but it is difficult to trace his individual influences. By his time, Hermetic traditions and Neoplatonism had become intermingled with other types of mystical thought.

Although Paracelsus and Böhme are often discussed together, almost as master and pupil, they are instead joint participants in a network of ideas. But Böhme did employ, according to Weeks, “a considerable stock of Paracelsian terms, concepts, and theories.” For example, Böhme adopted the triad of mercury, sulphur, and salt, and the Paracelsian “theory of the healing purposes of alchemy,” as well as a trichotomous anthropology: body, soul, and spirit.

Böhme’s writings and those of his fellows are characterized by “divided longings for order and freedom,” as Weeks describes it, engendered by the unsettled political climate in which they lived. Böhme hoped for a world beyond heresy trials and division between Catholic and Protestant. He was part of a pansophic movement that sought to synthesize pagan, Protestant, and heretical writings. This movement built upon the Renaissance idea of the prisca theologia and revival of ancient wisdom and promoted the view that Moses (in the past) possessed secrets and keys that could be restored, and lead to “new advances in science and medicine,” according to Weeks. During Böhme’s

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103 1991, 10.
104 1991, 50.
105 1991, 16.
day, even the discoveries of Copernicus, who placed the sun at the center of the universe, were being credited to the ancient Greeks.

Böhme “came to embrace the belief that ancient knowledge was resurfacing in order to reinforce and clarify the Christian articles of faith,” Weeks writes.\(^{107}\) He also resisted good-evil and spirit-matter dualisms and false dichotomies. Fully aware of Copernicus’s heliocentric model of the universe, Böhme tried to “synthesize the structure of heliocentric nature with the esoterically conceived, vitalistic forces present in all things,” as Weeks puts it. Böhme speculated that the sun could be both in the heavens and in the center of the earth.\(^{108}\) Perhaps spirit and matter were not opposed but transforming one another as part of the Triune nature of man and God. And perhaps the divine was present in living plants in the same way that Christ was present in the Eucharist.

Böhme’s visions continued the inversion of the chain that had been begun by Paracelsus and, well before him, Meister Eckhart. No doubt drawing upon his own ecstatic vision, he wrote in his first work, known as *Aurora*: “For the true heavens are everywhere, even where you stand and walk. If your spirit grasps the innermost birth of God and penetrates the sidereal and fleshly [birth], then it is already in heaven.”\(^{109}\) The metaphor of the congruity of heaven and earth reflects Böhme’s syncretic project of discovering God in the world. As outlined by Weeks, this vision is fundamentally about demonstrating that “spirit is a vital substrate of elemental matter, latent in the element.”\(^{110}\) Böhme also compared human development to the growth of life, and ultimately set forth a vision of salvation in which humans liberate nature from corruption.

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108 1991, 86.
110 1991, 64.
and thus purify the divine substance. The process of reintegration ends with a return to the original state of Adam, and the body is not left behind but transmuted.

Böhme further developed the Hermetic idea that the divine comes to self-understanding through its revelation in the world, and creates out of a desire to know itself. In the end, Böhme leaves us with, as Hanegraaff describes it, a “positive view of the body and the senses [which] would remain a constant in later Christian theosophical traditions.”¹¹¹ For Böhme, the goal was to discover the hidden God in the soul and thereby experience transformation and rebirth.¹¹²

**Table 8: The Immanent Divine in Nature: Eckhart, Paracelsus and Böhme**

1. The human-divine connection is expressed as the flowing of a fountain or the germination of a seed (Eckhart).
2. The microcosm influences the macrocosm, i.e., lower links in the chain can affect the higher (Paracelsus).
3. Nature is a source of healing, miracles are the harnessing of natural forces (Paracelsus).
4. The spirit is an envelope of the soul, borrowed from the stars, a guide and teacher (Paracelsus).
5. Nature is dynamic and changing (Paracelsus).
6. Ancient secrets will lead to advances in science and medicine and confirm Christian faith (Böhme).
7. The Eucharist is an analogy for the presence of God in nature (Böhme).
8. Spirit as a life force is latent in matter (Böhme).
9. The goal of life is to discover the hidden God in the soul and thereby experience transformation and rebirth (Böhme).

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¹¹¹ 2005, 30.
¹¹² Böhme’s thought was elaborated during the Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century into a system called Naturphilosophie by thinkers such as Friedrich Schelling and Franz von Baader. In Naturphilosophie, the purpose of creation is divine self-knowledge, and nature and spirit are seen as united.
Chapter 2: Human Destiny in the Expanded Universe

Developments in astronomy and physics between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries catalyzed transformations of esoteric ideas about the great chain and human destiny. The so-called Cusan metaphor was inspired in the fifteenth century by Nicholas of Cusa’s elaboration on a passage from a pseudo-Hermetic book that states: “God is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.” Cusa used this image to suggest a universe without center or limits.

Speculations about an infinite cosmos gained weight with the discoveries of Nicolaus Copernicus concerning a heliocentric solar system and Johannes Kepler concerning elliptical orbits. Kepler also identified irregularities in the “fixed” stars, which challenged ideas of heavenly perfection. Giordano Bruno had proposed in the sixteenth century that the universe contained infinite worlds and possibilities for human development in reincarnations after death. His proposal for the expansion of the cosmos was also logically supported with reference to the “principle of sufficient reason,” as Lovejoy argued. Bruno wrote, “There can be no ‘grade of being which, in its own place in the series, is not good in relation to the whole body.”

Bruno’s ideas were heretical enough to lead to his trial and execution. But as astronomical developments continued to support them, they sparked new innovations in the idea of man’s place in the universe. The idea that there were other inhabited planets took root. Robert Burton, in 1621, wrote of “two green children” who fell from heaven,

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2 1964, 118.
3 Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 119.
writes Lovejoy, and argued that other planets are inhabited.\textsuperscript{4} By the second half of the seventeenth century, thanks both to Cartesianism and Bruno, there was “rapidly growing acceptance” of theories about the “plurality and infinity of worlds.”\textsuperscript{5} Henry More (1614-1687), known as the Cambridge Platonist, and revered by both Blavatsky and Myers, was, according to Lovejoy, “the most zealous defender of the infinity of worlds.” He wrote of: God’s “endless overflowing goodness” spilling “in every place,” and contriving it into “infinite severall worlds…/For matter infinite needs infinite worlds must give.”\textsuperscript{6}

These infinite worlds were eventually incorporated into the great chain metaphor. Leibniz (1646-1716) speculated about life on other planets in his system of nature, which extended from the earth to the heavens in graded sequence. He described all “classes of beings” as “closely united…ordinates of a single curve” such that nothing could be placed between any of them. “Thus men are linked with the animals, these with the plants and these with the fossils” such that “all the orders of natural beings form but a single chain.” For Leibniz, the existence of “plant-animals” as a link between vegetal and animal life was “wholly in keeping with the order of nature.”\textsuperscript{7} Leibniz also postulated that more beings might be discovered that were intermediate to and beyond the existing species: “In every particle of the universe a world composed of an infinity of creatures is contained,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{4} 1964, 110.  
\textsuperscript{5} Lovejoy 1964, 124.  
\textsuperscript{6} Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 125.  
\textsuperscript{7} Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 145.  
\textsuperscript{8} Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 182.
**Swedenborg and Volitional Progress after Death**

Leibniz’s ideas of continuity and infinity of creatures influenced Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who would have a powerful impact on generations of religious and esoteric thinkers to the present day, including Myers, Blavatsky, the spiritualist movement, and the “modern heaven” view that was ascendant in the nineteenth-century milieu. A Swedish scientist and nobleman turned visionary, Swedenborg incorporated scientific imagery and methodology into his writings as he sought to develop a new interpretation of Christian scripture that would be compatible with science as he understood it.

Like many religious thinkers, Swedenborg claimed his writings were divinely inspired. He was not only a scientist (an inventor and mining inspector) but also the son of a Lutheran priest. In middle age, he had a spiritual crisis characterized by disturbing dreams, which eventually were succeeded by experiences of divine presence, including dialogue with Jesus Christ. In the late 1740s, Swedenborg began publishing volumes of religious interpretation that established his reputation as a seer and theologian. His chief interest was the nature of the soul, of matter, and its relationship with both the divine and the sensual worlds. He was attempting, writes Inge Jonsson, to “provide a theoretical foundation for his views of the intercommunication of the soul with the senses and through them with the world of matter.”9 Although Swedenborg was certainly aware of Neoplatonic and Hermetic literature, his work contained much that was new, leading Hanegraaff to describe him as one of “the select group of true innovators in the history of Western religion” who participated in “a series of overlapping and competing

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9 2007, xii.
discourses.”\textsuperscript{10} These discourses were esoteric as well as Christian, philosophical as well as scientific. Swedenborg situated himself within Enlightenment thought, and maintained what Hanegraaff calls a “broadly Cartesian framework.”\textsuperscript{11}

His visions did, however, give fresh impetus to esoteric ideas. He believed that there had been four “churches” in biblical history, of which the first existed before the Flood and the last began with the New Testament. A new, “fifth” church was destined to emerge to coincide with his own revelations. Although Swedenborg did not found a church, numerous Swedenborgian churches sprang up after his death. His general message was opposition to the dead ritual of outward worship, as well as to justification by either faith or works. Instead, he promoted complex notions of spiritual love, advocating what he called a more genuine love of neighbor, and love based on internal drive. He asserted that the Second Coming is experienced by each individual after death and can also be experienced spiritually during life. His speculations, particularly his opposition to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, led to the rejection of his work by the established Lutheran church.

Among his most influential innovations were his descriptions of heaven, his division of the afterlife into heaven, hell, and a type of purgatory (unknown in Protestant systems), and his assertion that humans may advance progressively in the next life, becoming spirits, angelic spirits, and angels, not waiting for resurrection. This is a “radical humanization” of Heaven, as Hanegraaff describes it.\textsuperscript{12} Swedenborg also deemphasized Christ, but revered him for having restored “human freedom in spiritual

\textsuperscript{10} 2007, xxi–xxii.
\textsuperscript{11} 2007, 11.
\textsuperscript{12} 2007, 53.
things” by taking on a body. Swedenborg believed Christ was available as a power to call upon during life.

For Swedenborg, the soul’s destiny after death is self-created through life choices. Heaven is cooperative—everyone contributes to the afterlife, and hell is not fiery punishment but a kind of work house. Souls are able to experience their own imaginary vision of heaven as an instructive experience to help them understand that the joy of heaven is the expression of love and wisdom and the “delight of doing something that is useful to ourselves and to others.”

Life in heaven includes the love of a partner, and even “conjugal love,” a combined body-soul union of which Swedenborg gave his own material-spiritual definition. The heavenly body is like the earthly one, including all its parts and organs, and sex is experienced only with one’s “eternal” partner. Such intercourse is more blessed than on earth, since angelic perception and sensation are superior to human perception, but without, of course, generation.

Swedenborg had a great impact on both spiritualism and nineteenth-century concepts of heaven, the afterlife, and human destiny, which will be reviewed after a discussion of the naturalistic and progressive ideas about human transformation that were developing at the same time.

**Table 9: Swedenborg Responses to an Expanded Cosmos**

1. There may be an infinite number of worlds, including other inhabited planets where humans may reincarnate or live after death (Bruno and others).
2. The resurrection takes place immediately after death (Swedenborg).
3. The resurrection body is like the physical body but more refined (Swedenborg).
4. The Second Coming is experienced by each person after death and spiritually during life (Swedenborg).
5. The afterlife is experienced in a series of levels or spheres, through which one can advance, based on one’s conduct (Swedenborg).

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13 Swedenborg 1954 (1768), 7 §5.
14 1954, 53 §44.
6. People have choices in the afterlife, based on their inclinations (Swedenborg).

**Man in the Middle: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Naturalistic Descriptions of the Chain of Being**

Swedenborg was just one among many thinkers who elaborated upon and transformed the chain of being during the eighteenth century, the period when the metaphor gained its widest acceptance. It became, as Lovejoy puts it, “the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century,” alongside the term “Nature.”15 Although scientific ideas were spreading, the chain remained popular in spite of its non-scientific nature—as Lovejoy puts it, it was “obviously not a generalization derived from experience, nor was it, in truth, easy to reconcile with the known facts of nature.”16 Perhaps its salience lay not only, as mentioned, in its rootedness in the primary “more is up” metaphor but also in the rich possibilities it offered for conceptual blending in light of new scientific paradigms.

John Locke (1632-1704) had invoked the metaphor as a chain when he wrote of the rationality of believing in both higher and lower links. As he put it: it was “suitable” to the “harmony of the universe” that “species of creatures should also, by gentle degrees, ascend upwards from us towards [the Maker’s] infinite perfection, as we see they gradually descend from us downwards.”17 Locke used the term “gentle” to describe transitions between species, while a contemporary called these gradations “almost

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15 1964, 184.
16 1964, 183.
17 Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 184.
insensible,”18 thus invoking the principle of continuity and recalling Leibniz’s calculus, with its curves composed of infinitesimally small segments of straight lines.

The discovery of minuscule creatures under the microscope provided further support for the principles of continuity and plenitude, and gave renewed vigor to the metaphor. It also transformed the conception of beings higher up on the chain, who began to be perceived not necessarily as angels, but as biologically-based inhabitants of other planets. Truly, every corner of nature seemed to be populated.

Immanuel Kant was not immune from these speculations. He described humans as occupying “the middle rung of the Scale of Being,” with the higher grades inhabiting Jupiter and Saturn, while those lower than humans inhabited Venus and Mercury.19 Lovejoy suggested Kant may have developed these ideas not from scientists but from the writings of the English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Pope’s Essay on Man suggests that the “superior beings” inhabiting other globes would probably view a “Newton” as humans view apes,20 an analogy that was steadily elaborated during the nineteenth century.

Eighteenth-century biology also cast doubt on Aristotle’s concept of fixed species. The principle of continuity suggested that fine gradations blurred one species into another, including from plant to animal and animal to human. This notion set naturalists, as Lovejoy puts it, searching “for forms which would fill up the apparently ‘missing links’ in the chain.”21 Thus the metaphor of the chain of being, though “purely speculative and traditional,” had an effect upon natural history. Thomas Sprat, historian

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18 Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 185.
19 Quoted in Lovejoy 193, from Kant’s Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels (1755, 133).
20 Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 193.
21 1964, 231.
of the Royal Society, wrote in 1667 that the purpose of the society was “to rank all the 
varieties and degrees of things so orderly upon one another.”

Links were also sought between humans and “lower” creatures. The term 
\textit{Hottentot}, now considered a pejorative, was invented by Dutch settlers to describe a tribe 
in southwestern Africa. This tribe came to be commonly invoked as representing the bottom rung of “savage” life, and a possible connection between apes and humans. However, Africans were not the only group identified as possible bottom rungs. “Savages” were also identified in South America, Ireland, and even Novaya Zemlya in Russia. In 1713, an English essayist writing of the similarities between apes and humans stated that the orangutan, a large primate sometimes called the “Man of the Woods,” had as much a claim to being human as “the savage Hotentot, or stupid native of Nova Zembla.”

As mental organization and cultural sophistication became measures of status on the perceived chain, the notion of human progress into higher forms of being also began to be described in terms of endless education, which extended without limit up the chain. In 1780, the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) published his theories on progressive perfection in \textit{The Education of the Human Race}. He began by proposing that God provides humans with the religious teachings appropriate to their level of development—his way of explaining why the New Testament had succeeded the Old.

Lessing presented the divine plan for human existence as progressive from

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 232.
\item[23] Quoted in Lovejoy 1964, 234.
\end{footnotes}
century to century, and continuing into the afterlife. He suggested that the opportunity to learn after death would permit the inequities of earthly life to be corrected. In addition, he promoted reincarnation as another way to pursue progressive improvement: “Why should I not come back as often as I am able to acquire new knowledge and new accomplishments?” he asked. As Hanegraaff points out, Lessing’s version of reincarnation differs from Eastern versions. “For Lessing, reincarnation is not a cycle of necessity from which human souls should try to escape, but a process of education by which God patiently leads the human race to maturity.” The concept of reincarnation appears periodically in evolutionary esotericisms, and will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6. Before the conclusion of this chapter, we will also further examine the idea of progress as understood in the nineteenth century.

The greatest transformation of the chain, which led to its ultimate untenability in biology, was its temporalization, an eighteenth-century development. Spurred by the discovery of extinct species, speculation grew that perhaps not all species had existed since creation. Lovejoy declared that “the static and permanently complete Chain of Being broke down largely from its own weight.” It was unable to support the idea of the beginning and end of species and the lack of continuous series of species in nature. But, as we shall see, it retained its vitality in religion and philosophy, and continued to be relied upon in biology by many nineteenth-century scientists.

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27 1964, 245.
Pre-Darwinian Naturalistic and Scientific Ideas about Species Formation

As we prepare to evaluate the impact of Darwin’s theory of natural selection on evolutionary esotericisms, it is appropriate to briefly review the naturalistic ideas available in the nineteenth century concerning the formation and transformation of species. Even in ancient times, people had developed naturalistic myths to compete with religious narratives. In the first century BCE, Lucretius proposed several naturalistic ideas about how species were formed and created. He imagined that in an earlier, more fecund time, animals might have grown from the ground like plants, being nourished from the earth. Eventually the earth, like an old woman, ceased to support the growth of new animal species, which caused the decline of contemporary life.²⁸ Lucretius also subscribed to the common ancient concept, perhaps inspired by fossils, that giants and monstrous creatures had existed in the past.

By the nineteenth century, thanks to the systematic study of geology and fossil records, all educated people agreed that the earth was at least several million years old. Fossils suggested a progressive emergence of life over time, an idea which was also supported by the so-called “nebular hypothesis” originally suggested by Kant, that the earth and other planets had been created when clouds of dust particles condensed under their own weight. Enlightenment thinkers attempted to show the plan of a creator in the distribution of species, focusing on the suitedness of species for their habitats, which suggested a designer with a predetermined goal. This teleological idea, as historian Peter Bowler explains, was an “obstacle to the development of the more open-ended idea of

progress through diversity accepted today.”

In the eighteenth century, as part of the temporalization of the chain of being, other naturalists revised the chain as a “plan of development through time,” as Bowler puts it. In 1764, the naturalist Charles Bonnet offered a modern progressive version of the chain, with man above monkeys, and speculated that animals might also have souls, which could be resurrected in the future in a higher form of body.

Eventually, naturalists realized that nature was too complex for a linear plan of development, and settled on divine creation of fixed hierarchies of species, with the religious caveat that these species could neither go extinct nor be altered. As more complex systems of classification developed, these hierarchical systems too began to be perceived as untenable. The Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) broke with the hierarchical ranking altogether, and used reproductive organs as the key to classification. He also realized, according to Bowler, that different environments could contribute to “multiplication of the species within a genus,” and thereby threatened the “traditional distinction between species and varieties.”

Competing theories of generation emerged, including William Harvey’s seventeenth-century “preformation theory,” the idea that all animals grow from eggs, and that each “germ” or seed of life contains a complete miniature individual, like a nested doll, which existed within the female from its origins, going back to the first human. During the eighteenth century, in opposition to the germ theory, it was proposed that life might have begun spontaneously, through natural causes, and not by divine creation at

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29 Bowler 1984, 51.
30 1984, 55.
32 Bowler 1984, 53.
all. It was also proposed that environmental conditions might contribute to animal and human characteristics. For example, dark skin might be caused by the heat of the tropics. Indeed, Enlightenment atheists came close to natural selection. But, Bowler remarks, “we should not be misled by superficial similarities into assuming that they contribute directly to the Darwinian revolution.”33

Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles Darwin) “was a deist who believed that God had designed living things to be *self-improving* through time,” writes Bowler.34 This notion became known as the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and would take on great importance in nineteenth-century debates. The most prominent formulation of this theory was made by Jean-Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829), a professional naturalist. He proposed (1) spontaneous generation of simple organisms, (2) followed by increased complexity of organization, and (3) that organisms can change in response to conditions of life. Lamarck’s chain of being, comments Bowler, “has a number of major branches and many gaps.”35 Lamarck rejected extinction and proposed that adaptation, the so-called inheritance of acquired characteristics, could explain the changes in species over time. Today, this is what is commonly meant by Lamarckism.

Many nineteenth-century naturalists looked for ways to preserve the unique status of humans. The biologist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) synthesized Christian creationism with German idealism—which related “progress” and “the unfolding of a rationally ordered pattern aimed at eventual production of nature’s highest type: man,” writes

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33 1984, 76.
34 1984, 77.
35 1984, 81.
Indeed the idea of progress in biology was front and center in Darwin’s day but it was becoming more nuanced, and no longer necessarily conceived of as linear. Non-linearity developed from the thought of, among others, Karl Ernst von Baer (1792-1876), who opposed what was then known as “recapitulation theory” (ultimately summarized by Ernst Haeckel as “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”). Recapitulation theory held that the stages of development of the embryo reprise the stages in the scale of nature, from fish to reptile to mammal. For von Baer the embryo did not recapitulate evolutionary development; rather, all embryos start from simple forms, and the similarities between the human fetus and other animals was the result of less differentiation among more primitive species. He proposed branching hierarchies in place of linear scales of development, an idea that influenced Darwin.

Progress in biology and progress in geology were two different matters, and a system that promoted stasis in one area could accommodate change in another. The geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1875), who was hugely influential on Darwin (as well as Blavatsky and many other Victorians) sought to preserve a static model of species along with a uniformitarian model of gradual (as opposed to catastrophic) geological change. He postulated a life span for the earth of at least three-hundred million years, proposing that the slow rise of land in certain areas was compensated by its slow subsidence in others. Lyell was eventually forced to admit that species could change, but resisted the implication of a link between humans and animals, partly out of religious concerns and a reluctance to admit that the appearance of humans could be viewed as a type of progress.

\[\text{36 1984, 105.}\]
from earlier forms. But many others were being led to that conclusion, based on the fossil record.

**Popular Progress Narratives: Chambers and Spencer**

Progressive naturalistic explanations for the development not only of life but also of culture and civilization figured prominently in nineteenth-century narratives, as will become apparent through the review below of two popular figures who published their work prior to the 1859 appearance of *Origin of Species*. In 1844, an anonymous book was published in London called *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. It was a popular synthesis of naturalistic ideas of creation. It promoted itself as presenting the scientific developments of the preceding two decades but maintained a reverential deist tone towards a creator even as it postulated continuous development of humans from animals, with progress towards an ever-higher state.

The book’s wild popularity provoked endless speculation as to its authorship; it was eventually revealed as the creation of the Scottish newspaper publisher Robert Chambers, though not until after his death in 1871. The book was read across all strata of society in Britain and America by figures such as Queen Victoria, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Abraham Lincoln, and Florence Nightingale. In Great Britain alone, it ran to fourteen editions, selling nearly forty thousand copies, rivaling Dickens’s early novels and outselling Darwin’s *Origin of Species* until 1882.37 In America, where twenty editions were published, the number of readers surpassed the British.

One American monthly noted in 1846 that the book was “familiar to every

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37 Secord 2000, 2, 3, 526.
reader” and, as James Secord writes in his reception history, “Vestiges was the one book that all readers of the *Origin of Species* were assumed to have read.” Of course Darwin and T.H. Huxley had read it, but so had Myers. While there is no direct evidence that Blavatsky had read it, she adopted some of the vocabulary and arguments of the work, which suggests that she had at least absorbed it through the zeitgeist.

*Vestiges* promotes a “science of progress” that, as Secord describes it, is “focused on development and gradual change, with close ties to liberal political economy and middle-class reform.” Chambers, like Darwin, used the phrase “economy of nature” but he refused to draw a pessimistic, Malthusian conclusion about struggle for scarce resources. Rather, he asserted that “there may yet be a faith derived from this view of nature sufficient to sustain us under all sense of the imperfect happiness, the calamities, the woes, and pains of this sphere of being.”

*Vestiges* evoked a variety of responses from the religious. One early reviewer declared it incompatible with religion. In 1845, the *American Review* published a declaration by one Lewis Taylor, that “To style this book infidel…would be pronouncing upon it too mild a condemnation.” However, in Britain, although the Anglican clergy found the book a threat, they delayed composing a coherent response, given the book’s lip service to the laws of nature and other deist principles. But laymen reacted on their own. The millennialist lawyer and evangelical Samuel Richard Bosanquet opposed the book on the ground that it denied miracles, called the Bible a fable, and, as Secord puts it,

38 2000, 39.
39 1994, xiv.
40 1994 (1844), 386.
41 Quoted in Secord 1994, xi-xii.
declared “human beings no better than beasts.”

A more official reaction from Adam Sedgwick, a high-profile Anglican cleric who was also a geologist, focused on the book’s blurring of the lines between human and animal. Sedgwick, a Cambridge don, excoriated the book for suggesting that animal instinct had been transformed into human reason. However, not every clergyman rejected *Vestiges*. Myers’s father, the Reverend Frederic Myers (1811-1851), praised *Vestiges* at least “for its range and ambition, if not its actual performance,” writes Secord. Eventually, more liberal theologians moved to accommodate *Vestiges*. However, despite its approval among the scientifically minded of the Victorian era, the book would fail among twenty-first century Darwinians, since it claimed to have found evidence of “design,” and therefore a “designer, another word for a Creator.” Nevertheless, its piety provided the sugar-coating that allowed this dose of science to be consumed by the nineteenth-century masses.

*Vestiges* popularized Kant’s nebular hypothesis, which suggested that an increasing complexification of the solar system preceded the development of life. Chambers suggested that “[t]he nebulous matter of space, previously to the formation of stellar and planetary bodies, must have been a universal Fire Mist, an idea which we can scarcely comprehend, though the reasons for arriving at it seem universal.” Chambers also supported von Baer’s law of embryonic development but co-opted it into a description of progress as a universal phenomenon, culminating in the creation of man.

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42 2000, 14.
43 See Secord 2000, 231–47.
44 2000, 229.
45 Chambers 1994 (1844), 324. Additional research is needed to determine the first use of the term “intelligent design.” John Wallis (1845, *A Brief Examination of the Nebulous Hypothesis*) uses the term.
46 1994, 27.
47 1994, 30.
As primary proof of the late date of human creation, he cited the lack of evidence for human remains in the earlier strata of fossils. “There is no authentic or satisfactory instance of human remains being found, except in deposits obviously of very modern date; a tolerably strong proof that the creation of our own species is a comparatively recent event, and one posterior (generally speaking) to all the great natural transactions chronicled by geology.”

Appealing to a common principle of Enlightenment deism, that the world operated according to a set of laws set in motion by God, Chambers attempted to show that a “natural” creation too might fall under the umbrella of natural law, asking: “what is to hinder our supposing that the organic creation is also the result of natural laws, which are in like manner an expression of his will?”

His theory contained elements of spontaneous generation that may sound comical today—invoking a “life-originating power” that had been more active in the past and even today was still producing new species in “special and extraordinary circumstances.” Citing contemporary experiments suggesting that insects and tiny animals could be created by electricity, Chambers proposed that animals originally came from “animalcules” becoming progressively more complex. He quoted an article on “Zoophytes” from the seventh (1827) edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, which speculated, as Chambers summarized it, that “particles of organized matter” are the “germinal origin of distinct and fully organized animals.” In other words, life came

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48 1994, 144.
49 1994, 154.
50 1994, 176.
51 1994, 180.
from matter and proceeded, Chambers wrote, “as a series of *advances of the principle of
development.*”

If Chambers’s description of the continual creation of life seems facile given what we know today, his description of the formation of man from primates likewise takes on a certain comical fluidity. Arguing against those who claimed that humans maintained a unique status separate from animals, he cited the resemblance of the human to the orangutan, and declared that humans “do not differ more from the simidae [primates] than the bats do from the lemurs.”

Chambers in 1844 boldly speculated on a matter that Darwin would not publicly discuss until 1871. He challenged those of his day who declared that mind was what distinguishes man from animals—arguing, rather, that the human mind is a part of nature, “absolutely the same in character” as those of “the lower animals,” though “developed within much narrower limits.” Unlike neo-Darwinism, Chambers’s vision of the continuity between the mind of animals and of “man” did not preclude the notion that humans might have an “immortal spirit.”

But he held steadfastly to his contention that man was linked with animals, although superior. He called man “the genuine head…of the whole animal world,” showing, with his ability to thrive “in all climates” and to “adapt himself to an infinitely greater diversity of circumstances than any other animated creature,” that he is, therefore, the “type of all types of the animal kingdom.” Human superiority did not necessarily

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53 1994, 203.
54 1994, 266.
55 1994, 326.
56 1994, 326.
57 1994, 267, 272.
mean that we are the endpoint of creation, however. Chambers asked, “Is our race but the initial of the grand crowning type? Are there yet to be species superior to us in organization, purer in feeling, more powerful in device and act, who shall take a rule over us?” He speculated that as the earth became more serene in the future, “There may then be occasion for a nobler type of humanity, which shall complete the zoological circle on this planet, and realize some of the dreams of the purest spirits of the present race.”

Chambers’s speculation that humans would be succeeded by a future species superior to humans would eventually percolate through the nineteenth-century imagination and became almost a truism for some of the figures we will study.

Reinvoking the endless, infinite upward sweep of the eighteenth-century chain of being, Chambers also asserted that the development of life could be traced to the “counsels of Divine Wisdom” operating, not only upon the earth, “this sphere,” but upon “all others in space.” His description of human destiny uses terms very similar to those of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Myers, and others who contributed to evolutionary esotericisms, as we will see. Some scientists, however, were no happier with Chambers’s flights of fancy than were the religious with his “atheistic” speculations. And there were genuine scientific reasons to object to *Vestiges*. Chambers had, according to Bowler, “greatly distorted the fossil record,” and “there were no signs of intermediate stages.”

In spite of these shortcomings, Chambers was deeply influential on the Victorian self-concept. Tennyson’s 1850 poem *In Memoriam* indirectly references *Vestiges* and, as Secord writes, “offered the most profound integration of the evolutionary narrative into

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58 1994, 276.
59 1994, 203.
60 1984, 139.
everyday experience.” Tennyson wrote of the soul moving “through life of lower phase,” eventually to man, who would “be born and think/And act and love, a closer link/Betwixt us and the crowning race.” Note that this poem, Tennyson’s lament for the death of a friend, is the same poem in which he famously described nature as “red in tooth and claw.” In the poem, the “crowning race” offers hope that humans can ultimately defeat the cruelties of the natural world through application of the keys of nature.

If Chambers provided progress for the people, the philosopher Herbert Spencer, widely respected in Victorian society, codified it for the elites, firmly associating the term evolution with progress in a work that, unlike Chambers’s, avoided polite nods to religion. In his 1855 Principles of Psychology, Spencer wrote of “human progression” as “an immense increase in the harmony between the organism and its environment” and “one of the many forms of the evolution we are tracing out.” Spencer’s 1857 essay Progress: Its Law and Cause was widely influential on the pre-Origin milieu and provided a framework upon which Darwin also drew when crafting his most famous work.

Developing a grand narrative, Spencer declared that progress could be charted in all areas of life in the increase in heterogeneity. His authorities were the embryologist Caspar Friedrich Wolff, along with Goethe and von Baer, all of whom he claimed had “established the truth that the series of changes gone through during the development of a seed into a tree, or an ovum into an animal, constitute an advance from homogeneity of

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61 2000, 530.
62 Epilogue:§128, Shatto and Shaw eds. 1982, 147, emphasis added.
63 §56:15, Shatto and Shaw eds. 1982, 80.
64 1855, 444.
structure to heterogeneity of structure.\textsuperscript{65}

Spencer stopped short of declaring a developmental principle for all species, but concluded that the “advance from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous…is clearly enough displayed in the progress of the latest and most heterogeneous creature—Man,” and went on to state a “law of all progress,” which he expected to attain the status of Kepler’s laws.\textsuperscript{66} As proof, he cited apparent increase in cranium size in higher forms of vertebrates, and employed a now debunked racist progress narrative in which Europeans were said to be more advanced than “savage” races because they had smaller jaws than groups such as indigenous Australians, who were commonly identified in nineteenth-century literature as the most primitive race. (These race theories, which influenced our nineteenth-century thinkers, will be covered in depth in chapter 5. Spencer also theorized that the nervous system of the “civilized” man was “more complex or heterogenous” than that of the “uncivilized man.”\textsuperscript{67} He went on to attempt to prove his point with examples from sociology and philology, insisting that art and culture as well as social organization become ever more complex as civilization advances. His system was teleological and deterministic in that he opposed free will, which might only disturb the “advance to a higher harmony” and the “grand progression which is now bearing Humanity onwards to perfection.”\textsuperscript{68}

Spencer employed the term \textit{evolution} in this essay specifically to describe the progress from simplicity to complexity, proposing that the “law” of organic progress also applied in culture and society, and could be seen as the “\textit{evolution} of the simple into the

\textsuperscript{65} 1857, 446.
\textsuperscript{66} 1857, 451, 465.
\textsuperscript{67} 1857, 452.
\textsuperscript{68} Spencer \textit{Principles of Psychology}, 1857, 620, 1855.
complex, through successive differentiations.”69 In this sense, as discussed in the introduction, evolution becomes, therefore, not just the emergence of one thing from another, but the progressively more complex emergence.

Evolution, as used by Spencer, describes many kinds of change; he made proposals that approximate but do not equate with natural selection. For example, he suggested that branching races might eventuate both extinctions and wide dispersals, leading to Lamarckian-style “modifications” of the species caused by “change of physical conditions and kind of nutriment, but also in some cases other modifications caused by change of habits.”70

Darwin admired Spencer, who would later, after Origin, go on to coin the term “survival of the fittest.” In a letter he wrote to Spencer while working on Origin, Darwin declared that he, Darwin, treated the subject “as a naturalist, and not from a general point of view; otherwise, in my opinion, your [Spencer’s] argument could not have been improved on, and might have been quoted by me with great interest.”71 However, Darwin, according to Rogers, did find “distasteful Spencer’s habit of generalizing from insufficient evidence.”72 This criticism must be weighed against Darwin’s praise, written in 1870, that he expected Spencer to be looked at in the future as “the greatest living philosopher in England, perhaps equal to any that have lived.”73

Darwin incorporated into Origin the basic narrative of progress espoused by Spencer, as well as the impact of habit and conditions of life on the adaptation of species.

69 1857, 446, emphasis added.
70 1857, 476–77.
71 Rogers 1972, 279, quoting Darwin’s Life and Letters 11-25-1, 1858.
72 Rogers 1972, 279.
73 Quoted in Rogers 1972, 279.
But though Darwin described Chambers’s book as having laid the groundwork for his *Origin*, clearly neither Spencer nor Chambers anticipated Darwinian natural selection, which ultimately challenged the very notion of a creator and, in the twentieth century, would be decoupled from the idea of progress. It will become apparent, however, as our narrative unfolds, that ideas of progress continued to be linked to evolutionary esotericisms long after they had been separated from evolution in science. And the progress narrative incorporated the notion that humans could transform themselves and their species through culture and habit. We will return to the relationship of evolution and progress several times in the course of this study.

As our review of systems from Plato to Swedenborg, Lucretius to Chambers has shown, when humans today conceive of themselves developing godlike powers or speculate about new intersections of the spiritual and material worlds, they are continuing and transforming themes that have been interwoven in the Western theological, literary, and scientific imagination for centuries. Future chapters will trace their fantastic contortions in response to the tectonic shifts that followed the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859.

**Table 10: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Naturalistic Species Formation**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Microscopic creatures represent the lowest levels of the chain, which stretches upward to other planets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Missing links in the chain connecting plants with animals and humans will be discovered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The earth is at least several million years old, and maybe hundreds of millions of years (Lyell, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Animals lived on earth for millions of years before humans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Some species become extinct and new ones emerge, suggesting branches rather than a chain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Humans developed from animals and may progress to higher forms (Chambers).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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74 Secord 1994, xlv.
7. Progress and evolution entail increasing complexification and movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity (Spencer).

*Healing as Salvation: Nineteenth-Century Ideas about Heaven, Afterlife, and the Destiny of Man*

Developments in the natural world are commonly paralleled by new theological concepts, as we have seen with Swedenborg. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, narratives emerged that linked new scientific developments with various healing systems and a more sophisticated connection of healing and religion. In the eighteenth century, a physician named Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) and others developed a healing technique that was believed to draw upon the “magnetic” forces in nature. Both doctors and amateur practitioners began experimenting with this mysterious power, eliciting trance “somnambulic” states in which people were healed of illnesses and able to perform seemingly miraculous feats that they often could not remember.

In 1807, a German physician named Johann Christian Reil proposed that the brain and spinal column represented a “cerebral system,” which was complemented by a separate “ganglion system,” rooted in the solar plexus. The narrative of this ganglion system was taken up by Carl Alexander Ferdinand Kluge, who incorporated it into a textbook on animal magnetism and identified it as the physical source of mesmeric phenomena. As Hanegraaff describes it, the ganglion system became known as the location of the “conscious and unconscious soul,” and was believed to be a gateway to psychic abilities, allowing access to what the German Romantic author Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert called the “mysterious ‘nightside’ of nature.”

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The ganglion model, seemingly rooted in medical science, supported the claim that mesmeric abilities are “‘natural’ human faculties…neither miraculous nor supernatural,” Hanegraaff comments.\textsuperscript{76} These “natural” latent powers were said to be available to everyone, permitting them to transform both body and mind in a therapeutic direction. Among the influential figures to take up this narrative was the physician Justinus Kerner, who wrote a popular book about the miraculous abilities of one of his patients, Frederike Hauffe, which influenced narratives about healing in Europe and America. Another German, the physician Joseph Ennemoser (1787-1854), wrote a \textit{History of Magic} that influenced Blavatsky. He maintained that “natural” laws governed all seemingly miraculous feats, of which magnetism was the modern, scientific emergence. These narratives also influenced Myers, who would go on to theorize about latent mental powers and the use of hypnotism in medicine as well as in psychology.

But what did all this have to do with salvation? By the mid-nineteenth century, popular Christian concepts about the afterlife in the United States and Great Britain were in flux. A “modern heaven” had emerged, heavily influenced by Swedenborg, which admitted progress and rejected medieval notions of stasis.\textsuperscript{77} Souls would not wait for bodily resurrection in their graves, but could hope to become angels immediately after death; progress towards the divine might be infinite or indefinite, and hell was deemphasized.

This sensibility could be traced not only to Swedenborg but to American metaphysical thinkers such as Warren Felt Evans (1817-1889) and Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910). Evans’s work was broadly influential in new religious trends both

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{76} 2012, 263.
\textsuperscript{77} See McDannel and Lang, 181–227.
}
inside and outside Protestant Christianity. Both thinkers influenced spiritualism, and pieces of their ideas became incorporated into evolutionary esotericisms. Their thinking was indebted not only to Swedenborg but to currents of vitalist thought that had emerged from mesmerism.\(^78\) Evans was a student of Phineas Quimby (1802-1866), a mental healer in Portland, Maine, whose other prominent student was Mary Baker Eddy, who founded the American new religion Christian Science in 1879.

Evans went on to become a well-known teacher in his own right, a founder of New Thought, a belief system characterized by positive thinking and mental healing. He proclaimed Swedenborg as a divine messenger and an “instrument of Providence in ushering in a new and better age of the Church.”\(^79\) According to Evans, Swedenborg had come “to lift men’s minds above the realm of sense, and to disclose the solid realities of an everywhere present spiritual world.”\(^80\) Evans may have been the first to proclaim a coming “New Age” and to link this age with the “dispensation” of the Holy Spirit, which he predicted would succeed the “dispensations” of the Father and the Son. In 1864 he declared that this “New Age” would be “characterized by a vivid faith in the reality of life beyond the grave.”\(^81\)

Evans, like Swedenborg, declared that the resurrection would take place immediately after death, and described the “spiritual” resurrected body in terms reminiscent of the material world. The risen man, Evans wrote, “possesses a real human

\(^{78}\) For a description of vitalism and its opposite, mechanism, in biology see Schubert-Soldern 1962.

\(^{79}\) 1864, 6.

\(^{80}\) 1864, 6, 8.

\(^{81}\) Evans 1864, 7, 71. Scholars generally trace the use of “New Age” to describe a contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century spiritual milieu to the work of Alice Bailey, a Theosophical Christian writing in the 1930s. However, sporadic use of similar terms occurred beforehand, including also in William Blake’s preface to an 1801 poem (see Sutcliffe 2007: 53, Kemp 2004, 41–42). There is widespread debate over the use and signification of the term (see also Chryssides 2007, Kemp 2004).
body with all its senses, organs, and powers…. That human form is the spiritual body.”

Evans also asserted the truth of other inhabited worlds as taught by Swedenborg.  

But his predictions were not limited to the afterlife. He proposed that the imminent New Age would be a time when life on earth would improve, particularly through the development and refinement of internal senses, permitting greater awareness of and communication with unseen worlds. His prediction resonated with, though did not actually reference, the theories of Ennemoser and other vitalists. Evans taught that these “inner senses” could be “uncovered,” allowing humans to become more aware of “heavenly things.” As discussed in chapter 5, the idea that humans are entering a period in which they are destined to develop or recover latent senses was woven into the esoteric tradition at this time and became highly influential on both spiritualism and evolutionary esotericisms.

_Spiritualism, Nature and Healing_  

Spiritualism was born in the 1840s and found its way into almost every corner of life in Great Britain and America. A broad-based and unorganized movement rather than a sect, it morphed rapidly from its inception in rappings and hauntings. As seances proliferated and mediums began to address topics of universal concern, spiritualism influenced politics, alternative medicine, science, psychology, and the feminist movement. It incorporated ideas from Swedenborg and Transcendentalism, and gave birth to numerous societies and churches. Spiritualists de-emphasized belief and creed while promoting the equality of men and women, the investigation of “natural” phenomena through scientific

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82 1864, 93–94.
83 1864, 16.
methods, and the quest for natural laws governing the universe. The movement was commonly discussed in the popular press; such figures as Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New York Tribune*, and Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, pursued serious inquiries into spiritualist claims.

Among the reform causes taken up by spiritualists was that of strengthening the body by improving health and transforming medicine. Mediums prescribed and diagnosed, generally advising the avoidance of the strong purgatives and opiates that were commonly dispensed by medical doctors in the nineteenth century. They also promoted vegetarianism and abstinence from stimulants.84

Spiritualist innovations in theology enriched the emerging modern heaven paradigm. Many Americans, especially among liberal Protestant denominations, rejected hell and the idea that children were born sinful. Spiritualism took these ideas even farther, in some cases, right outside of Christianity, eliminating even the need for a Savior. Ann Braude writes:

Spiritualism presented the most extreme version of the rejection of the Puritan view of the child as a vessel of imputed sin unredeemed by conversion…. Spiritualists believed that human nature did not need to be transformed, that human beings were born good, each reflecting the image of God, and therefore did not need to be saved.85

Though churches might not have accepted them as such, spiritualists often considered

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84 See Braude 1989, chapter 6.
85 1989, 41.
themselves Christian. As Braude writes, “many investigators found support for their Christian faith at the séance table.”\textsuperscript{86} Apparitions and other phenomena were seen as proving the miracles of the Bible, and Christian-oriented spiritualist churches emerged. Spiritualists promoted a progressive salvation—souls would advance and learn after death, and the souls of infants and children who died young would be permitted to mature through a series of heavenly spheres.

This progression is reminiscent of Swedenborg but was given a more concrete reality by Andrew Jackson Davis, the “seer of Poughkeepsie,” a town in upstate New York, who became the unofficial theologian of the movement. Davis was a self-taught visionary, medium and trance healer, whose voluminous philosophical and theological writings were hugely influential in nineteenth-century America, were cited by Blavatsky, and influenced the debate about spiritualism. Davis recast Swedenborg in a more physicalist vein, with a “material” God, though his work flatly defended what most today would call the spiritual world.\textsuperscript{87}

Davis was also willing to apply his progressive vision of the future to the past history of life on earth. In his 1850 work \textit{The Great Harmonia}, Davis offered one of the first esoteric references to the theory of the development of humans from animals, likely a popular one in his day, given the 1844 publication of Robert Chambers’s popular work \textit{Vestiges}. Chambers, it will be recalled, proposed that humans had developed naturally from animals, specifically the primates. Davis rejected the idea that “quadrumana,” a common term for primates, had metamorphosed into man. Rather, he proposed that man was “developed” after animals, vegetables, and minerals, “by a focal concentration of all

\textsuperscript{86} 1989, 42.
\textsuperscript{87} See Albanese 1992.
the elements, essences, and substances, under the most perfect conditions and influences which exist in Nature. The Deity operates and creates according to unchangeable and impartial laws.”

However, his rejection of the metamorphosis of animals to humans also strained to accommodate emerging naturalistic conceptions of the development of life and a law-based universe. In his attempt to address the perceived similarities between humans and primates, he drew a progressive picture of the unfolding of life on earth that relies heavily on metaphors indebted to the great chain of being:

Mammalia embrace all animals which suckle their young. Thus the higher we ascend in Nature the more closely allied do we find the various organizations to Man. It is almost impossible to contemplate Nature with a comprehensive, generalizing eye, and determine which to first term man—whether the highest of the quadrupeds, or the lowest of the human type—so gradual and progressive is the emergence of one kingdom into another!\(^89\)

Ultimately, he settled upon the “spiritual” qualities of the brain as the unique human quality, which made us both a part of matter and something beyond it. Davis developed an elaborate explanation for the superiority of the human brain, declaring that human brains are adapted to receive “atoms that have emerged from the perfect spiral [of created forms] into the spiritual, which is Spirit…. The internal arrangement of Man’s brain renders it capable of receiving and doing what no animal can; but all created forms are

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\(^88\) 1850, 19.

\(^89\) 1850, 24.
emulous of Man.” Davi90 was echoed by the contemporary trance lecturer Emma
Hardinge Britten, who also influenced the biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, as reviewed
in chapter 4.

Davis, a healer, also held forth on topics related to health and healing. He
promoted a philosophy of health influenced by magnetism, described disease as lack of
“equilibrium in the circulation of the spiritual principle through the physical
organization,” and praised the homeopathist Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843).91 Like
Evans, Davis appears to have been influenced by Ennemoser and other vitalists who
linked magnetism and trances with latent mesmeric powers and the ability to access
higher perceptions. He declared that “magnetic influences” can put people in a
transfigured state “analogous to death,” and that “enlightened individuals” with
spiritually opened perceptions have been in the past capable of discovering the “laws and
universal tendencies of nature.” He numbered among these enlightened individuals Jesus,
Plato, Swedenborg, and Jakob Böhme.92

Davis also attempted a new vision of the relationship between the body and the
soul. He proposed that whatever acts were performed by the human body on earth would
impact the material-spiritual body that would be worn through eternity. Everything that a
person does on earth—eating food, drinking water, thinking thoughts—plays a role in the
preparation of the future body.93 Davis thus provided another route by which therapeutic
language became attached to salvation.

Though he was claimed as a leader by the spiritualist movement, Davis did not

90 1850, 28–29.
91 1850, 102–3.
92 1850, 158.
93 1918, 130.
Prophet: Evolution Esotericized

embrace it wholeheartedly. Early on, in 1859, he sought to draw a distinction between his own “philosophical” spiritualism and that of the séances, which he termed “phenomenal” spiritualism. By the 1890s, spiritualism had lost much of its earlier dynamism, thanks to pressure from within and without, which followed the very public exposure of frauds and perpetual schisms over competing claims to legitimacy.\textsuperscript{94} Davis publicly denounced spiritualism after it had become tarnished by scandals. He was not the only figure to have begun in the midst of spiritualism only to reject it. Another was Helena Blavatsky, whose relationship with spiritualism will be explored in chapter 4.

**Table 11: Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Visions of Heaven**

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Future humans will have more developed internal senses and mediumistic talents (Evans, Davis).</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No hell, and progressive improvement after death (spiritualism).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Humans did not develop from animals, but afterwards, by imperceptible gradations, and represent the culmination of the essences of Nature (Davis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The human brain is adapted to receive spiritual “atoms,” and its spiritual qualities make us unique from animals (Davis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Disease is lack of equilibrium (Hahnemann).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Magnetic influences open the perceptions of certain special individuals and allow them to view the secrets of Nature (Davis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What happens to the body on earth affects the material-spiritual body that will be worn in eternity (Davis).</td>
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\textsuperscript{94} See Braude 180–82.
Chapter 3: Darwin, Wallace, and Victorian Science on the Evolution of Mind and Culture

The highest stage in moral culture at which we can arrive, is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts.

—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.

Esoteric responses to Darwin must be contextualized as a component of the immediate religious response to Darwin, which began shortly after the 1859 publication of *Origin of Species*. Helena Blavatsky and Frederic W.H. Myers were both situated in this milieu. *Origin* did not, as noted, include a theory of a hereditary link between humans and animals, which Darwin presented in his 1871 *The Descent of Man*. By that time, religious responses were not as vociferous as they might have been since the ground had already been prepared by Chambers and others. In spite of well-known confrontations between clergy and proponents of evolution, many religious thinkers sought to accommodate the new developments, and in the last decades of the nineteenth century it was common to hear talk of a “synthesis” of science and religion. Before reviewing these responses, we will first summarize the major propositions of *Origin, Descent of Man*, and the Darwinism of 1859 to 1900.

*The Origin of Species—Major Relevant Propositions*

Although Darwin had worked out the fundamentals of his theories in 1837 and 1838, not
long after returning from his famous round-the-world voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle (1831-1836), he did not publish them until more than twenty years later. He wrote Origin quickly in response to a query from the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), who had independently developed a similar theory based on his observations not only in South America but his extensive fieldwork in the Malaysian archipelago. Wallace’s paper, entitled “On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type,” was read at the Linnean society in London in July 1858, along with a paper by Darwin, and Darwin’s more comprehensive Origin was published the following year. Wallace was credited as co-discoverer with Darwin of natural selection.

Darwin’s chief objective was to demonstrate that species were not fixed, nor did they proceed one from the other in a continuous upward progress, as proposed by Chambers and others. Related species might be survivors of now extinct ancestors. Life could be compared neither to a ladder nor a chain, but to a tree, with dead branches and divergent shoots. In the words of Wallace, the relationships between species might be described as a “complicated branching of the lines of affinity, as intricate as the twigs of a gnarled oak or the vascular system of the human body.” Later, the metaphor of a bush or even a network of interconnected plants would appear more appropriate. Nevertheless, as shown below, Darwin found it difficult to avoid connecting evolution with progress, and portraying the topmost branches of the tree as more “advanced” than the lower.

In contrast to those who had envisioned humans as a transformation or transmutation from less complex forms, or the culmination of a chain of ideal types, Darwin proposed that a species could not be definitively distinguished from a variety, and

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was not a group of beings composed after the same ideal type, but was blended imperceptibly into other forms of life: “all living and extinct beings are united by complex, radiating, and circuitous lines of affinities into one grand system.”

In the introduction to *Origin*, Darwin critiqued the “author” of *Vestiges*, who had not yet been revealed as Chambers, writing that he “would, I presume, say” that species were “produced perfect as we now see them.” Such an assertion, Darwin wrote, could not explain “coadaptations of organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life, untouched and unexplained.”

Darwin laid out his case with the slow accumulation of facts, and his discussion of vestigial or rudimentary organs is particularly convincing against the notion of a grand design or purpose for life. He also noted the appearance of characteristics in young animals that seemed to hark back to related species—for example, the zebra-like stripes that often appeared in young horses, suggesting a common parent of both the domestic horse and the zebra. Those who believed each species was independently created with a tendency to vary would have to admit that hybrids often resemble not their parents but other species. Those who hold the position that God designed only pure species while ignoring such facts are, wrote Darwin (a deist en route to agnosticism), making “the works of God a mere mockery and deception.”

Darwin speculated in *Origin* that there might be just “a few” or perhaps even “one primordial form” or “prototype” from which “all the organic beings...have descended.”

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3 2006 (1859), 739. All citations of *Origin* are from the 1859 first edition as published in 2006, edited by Edward O. Wilson, unless otherwise noted.
5 2006 (1859), 556.
He also used the numbers *four* and *five*: “I believe that animals have descended from at most only four or five progenitors, and plants from an equal or lesser number.”⁷ These speculations concerning the limited number of original forms would be one of the key elements of Darwin’s theories to enter Blavatsky’s imagination and influence her complex conceptual blending.

Central to Darwin’s arguments for natural selection were his analogies to domestic breeding programs. However, he declared natural selection “immeasurably superior to man’s feeble efforts, as the works of Nature are to those of Art.”⁸ Nature selected for the benefit of “the being which she tends,” while man “selects only for his own good.”⁹ Darwin could not avoid discussion of the purpose or aim of natural selection, which he saw as improvement of all life forms, gained through the process of competition. He occasionally personified “Nature,” and used romantic language to describe the process of improvement.

Romantic language could not mask the subversive nature of his theories. Darwin drew upon the well-known theories of Thomas Malthus’s 1803 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which argued that humans tended to breed more quickly than their food supplies could increase, leading to struggle for scarce resources. Malthusian theories, according to Darwin, undermined religious notions of altruism, tolerance, and divine purpose, and suggested nature as an “economy…with every fact on distribution, rarity, abundance, extinction, and variation.”¹⁰ He presented this struggle as benefiting not just the species but also the individual when he declared that “any being, if it vary however

⁷ 2006 (1859), 756.
⁸ 2006 (1859), 489.
⁹ 2006 (1859), 503.
¹⁰ 2006 (1859), 489.
slightly in a manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be *naturally* selected... any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form.”  

11 As mentioned, it was Spencer who coined the term “survival of the fittest” to describe natural selection, in his 1864 *Principles of Biology*, 12 but Darwin thought it an apt phrase. 13 The discussion of the ethical ramifications of Darwin’s theories is continued later in the chapter. 

Darwin did not use the term *evolution* in *Origin* (it had already been used by Spencer), but he concluded his work with the word *evolved*, at the end of a paragraph edited by him through the six editions of *Origin* that were published during his lifetime. In the second edition, he added the words “by the Creator,” in spite of his own germinating agnosticism: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed *by the Creator* into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, *evolved*.” 14 

Darwin’s usage of the term *evolved*, one might say, marks the beginning of the transformation of the definition of *evolution* from the pre-Darwinian meaning, of “developing from a rudimentary to a mature or complete state,” and Spencer’s transformation from homogeneity to heterogeneity, to the modern definition, as any natural process for the development of life on earth. Despite Darwin’s nod to a “Creator,”

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12 Spencer 1864, 1:444–45.
14 Darwin 2006 (1859), 760; See also Darwin 1959, ed. Peckham, 759, emphasis added.
the bulk of *Origin* avoids catering to any kind of religious sensibility. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a creator in the second edition gave purchase to deists attempting to reconcile natural selection with faith.

As we categorize and situate the esoteric responses to Darwin, it will become apparent that they overlap with religious and scientific responses—*no one* was coloring within twentieth-century lines during this period. But Darwin provoked a variety of religious responses as clergy struggled to hold onto territory that was being demanded by science. Although public recollection is focused on a few memorable incidents of public combat, such as Huxley’s 1860 debate with the Anglican bishop Samuel Wilberforce, it was more common, particularly in England, for theologians to attempt to integrate religion with the new scientific paradigms.

The popular conception of a battle between science and religion is based partly on books like John W. Draper’s 1875 *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* and Andrew D. White’s 1896 *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*. But Bowler points out that “religion” is not a static nor monolithic entity, when considering conflicts between religion and science. “It is precisely because there is such a wide spectrum of religious beliefs that we need to look for a complex rather than a simple model of how science and religion interact.”

A typical liberal Christian reaction is one that greeted Darwin in a letter written to him in 1859 by Charles Kingsley, a clergyman: “I have gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self-development into all forms needful…as to believe that He required a fresh act of

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intervention to supply the *lacunas* which He Himself had made. I question whether the former be not the loftier thought.”

The latter half of the nineteenth century marked a period when many scientists were or had been clergymen, or had parents who were members of the clergy. The professional scientist was just beginning to emerge. Bowler writes of “the vast number of scientists who retained their religious beliefs and struggled to form a workable compromise.” In 1874, Francis Galton performed a survey of English scientists. He found, according to Bowler, that “seventy percent…still regarded themselves as Anglicans, and several later surveys still confirm a surprisingly high level of religious belief. It was these scientists, and like-minded religious thinkers, who created the new natural theology that would survive into the early twentieth century.”

This new natural theology has been characterized as representing a territorial battle between science and institutionalized religion. However, as will become clear through the narrative below, it also drew significantly upon support from thinkers who rejected institutionalized religious commitments and the authority of Scripture—that is, those who advanced various esoteric forms of religion and “spirituality” (another word coined in its modern sense in the late nineteenth century, by the way, by Walt Whitman).

**Persistence of Progress**

The compatibility of Darwinian evolution with a progress narrative won support for evolution among both religious and atheist thinkers. Although Darwin began with the

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16 Cited in McCalla 2006, 117.
intention of moving away from a linear notion of development, he nevertheless could not avoid associating evolution with progress, which he struggled to define. His notebooks of the 1830s demonstrate that he understood that there were multiple scales on which to measure “higher” and “lower” forms, and that he wished to avoid the terms himself. As James Costa summarizes:

In a note pinned into his copy of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Darwin wrote, “Never use the word [sic] higher and lower.” His B notebook of 1838 is punctuated with such cautionary notes: “It is absurd to talk of one animal being higher than another—we consider those, where the intellectual faculties most developed, as highest…. But who with the face of the earth covered with the most beautiful savannahs & forests dare to say that intellectuality is the only aim in this world.19

Nevertheless, twenty years later, in *Origin*, when laying out the process of natural selection, Darwin wrote, “As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.”20 He walked back his earlier doubts about ranking species, writing that though he understood that naturalists yet debated the meaning of “high” vs. “low” forms, and that there was no way of testing the theory, “in one particular sense the more recent forms must, on my theory, be higher than the more ancient; for each new species is formed by having had some advantage in the struggle for life over other and preceding forms.”21

20 2006 (1859), 760.
21 2006 (1859), 663.
Darwin even went so far as to evoke Aristotle’s *scala naturae* when he stated that the inhabitants of each successive period “have beaten their predecessors in the race for life, and are, in so far, higher in the scale of nature; and this may account for that vague yet ill-defined sentiment, felt by many palaeontologists, that organization on the whole has progressed.”

He speculated that embryology would, in future, prove that animals increase in complexity as they develop, though he allowed that this was not always the case. “The embryo in the course of development generally rises in organization: I use this expression, though I am aware that it is hardly possible to define clearly what is meant by the organization being higher or lower.” That a butterfly is “higher” than a caterpillar is beyond dispute, he observed, but also noted that in some cases, a mature animal is “generally considered as lower in the scale than the larva.”

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin stated that he found von Baer’s definition of organic progress to be best, describing it as resting “on the amount of differentiation and specialization of the several parts of the same being, when arrived, as I should be inclined to add, at maturity.” It was also in *Descent* that he laid out the connection between humans and primates, basing it on a principle of minute gradations that recalls Leibniz: “In a series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he now exists, it would be impossible to fix on any definite point when the term ‘man’ ought to be used.”

The emerging Darwinian narrative around progress clearly eliminated divine
purpose or any idea of a plan of nature, which proved difficult for both religious and secular advocates of progress to accept. Eventually, however, it would also be realized that Darwinism could be used to support a system that allowed greater freedom and autonomy to humans by eliminating any kind of fixed end point. In *Origin*, though he did occasionally fall back on a Chambers-style “progress” narrative, Darwin also celebrated change *without* a defined goal:

Slow though the process of selection may be if feeble man can do much by his powers of artificial selection, I can see no limit to the amount of change, to the beauty and infinite complexity of the co-adaptations between all organic beings, one with another and with their physical conditions of life, which may be effected in the long course of time by nature’s power of selection.26

It is this definition of change without progress, or towards an unspecified end, which would ultimately be seized on in the twentieth century as representing a liberation from both theology and teleology.

*Darwin and Lamarckism*

Central to the evolutionary esotericisms we will be reviewing is the question of whether humans can affect their descendants through altering their own culture or habits—and the broader question of the role of environment in the transformation of species. Arguments surrounding this topic swirled through the post-*Origin* landscape. While promoting

26 2006 (1859), 519.
natural selection of useful variations, Darwin made clear from the outset that he believed that the “conditions of life” were also a factor in organic change.

Darwin’s statements on the topic in *Origin* are tentative and occasionally contradictory, and he revised them in later editions. In the introduction to the first edition, he wrote, “I am convinced that Natural Selection has been the main but not exclusive means of modification.” However, when considering the “laws of variation,” Darwin acknowledged “ignorance of the cause of each particular variation.” Since the term *gene* was not coined until 1909, and genetics not applied to selection theory until the 1920s, Darwin could only fall back on the “conditions of life” to explain variation within a population. He admitted that he could not tell how much of variation to attribute to “the accumulative action of natural selection, and how much to the conditions of life.”

However, since some species “keep true” in spite of climate, he did conclude at least once that he was inclined “to lay very little weight on the direct action of the conditions of life” which, however, might act indirectly on the reproductive system.

He was suspicious of aspects of Lamarck’s theory from the beginning, while acknowledging him as “justly celebrated.” He pointed out, for example, that neuter insects cannot pass down their habits to offspring, and stated that he was “surprised,” therefore, that “no one has advanced this demonstrative case of neuter insects, against the well-known doctrine of Lamarck.” However, other factors led him to continue his speculations on the role of habit and the conditions of life. He noted that domestic

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27 2006 (1859), 452.  
28 2006 (1859), 535.  
29 2006 (1859), 536.  
30 Darwin 1959, ed. Peckham, 60.  
31 2006 (1859), 604.
animals might tend to develop habits that resembled natural instincts, and the two became “curiously blended together.”

The tendency of organs to deteriorate with disuse also tended to support a Lamarckian conclusion. Therefore, he wrote, “we may conclude that habit, use, and disuse, have, in some cases, played a considerable part in the modification of the constitution, and of the structure of various organs; but that the effects of use and disuse have often been largely combined with, and sometimes overmastered by, the natural selection of innate differences.” In the 1871 Descent of Man, he also acknowledged that environment impacted development: “it is scarcely possible to avoid the conclusion that better food and greater comfort do influence stature.” And he concluded that natural selection was aided by “the inherited effects of the increased or diminished use of the different parts of the body.”

In spite of his attempts to clarify his position, Darwin was attacked for not having given enough weight to the conditions of life, leading him to feel it necessary to add to his conclusion in the sixth (1872) edition of Origin the italicized words in the following paragraph:

I have now recapitulated the chief facts and considerations which have thoroughly convinced me that species have changed, and are still slowly changing by the preservation and accumulation of successive slight favourable variations; aided in an important manner by the inherited effects

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32 2006 (1859), 586.
33 2006 (1859), 541.
34 2006 (1871), 843.
35 2006 (1871), 846.
of the use and disuse of parts; and in an unimportant manner, that is in
relation to adaptive structures, whether past or present, by the direct action
of external conditions, and by variations which seem to us in our ignorance to
arise spontaneously. It appears that I formerly underrated the frequency and
value of these latter forms of variation, as leading to permanent modifications
of structure independently of natural selection.\textsuperscript{36}

These added words are generally left out of modern editions of \textit{Origin}, which tend
to follow the 1859 edition. However, during the latter half of the nineteenth century,
when early evolutionary esotericisms were being formed, it certainly would not have
been considered unscientific or anti-Darwin to believe that humans could alter the species
through habit and the efforts of mind and will. This notion is crucial to evolutionary
esotericisms and can be seen in at least two of the components of the typology identified
by Roszak, which are: “In spite of natural selection, humans have the power to direct the
evolution of their species through transforming culture,” and “We can take control of our
own evolution through changing our minds.”

\textbf{Darwinism between 1859 and 1900}

In the years following the publication of \textit{Origin}, Darwin was attacked by scientists on
several fronts, including the lack of empirical proof for his system, as well as the
incompleteness of the fossil record, and therefore the lack of evidence for gradual
transformation. Many thinkers were willing to admit some type of evolution but differed

\textsuperscript{36} Darwin 1959, Peckham ed., 747, emphasis added.
with Darwin on the particulars. Empirical support for natural selection had begun to emerge early-on, such as the publication, in the 1860s, by the naturalist Henry Walter Bates of work on mimicry in insects.\textsuperscript{37} Later in the nineteenth century, as described by Bowler, a “dogmatic ‘neo-Darwinism’” insisted that natural selection was the “only mechanism of evolution.”\textsuperscript{38} However, in America, supported by Agassiz and his students, paleontologists such as Edward Drinker Cope and Alpheus Hyatt started an American school of “neo-Lamarckism.”\textsuperscript{39}

In Germany, Ernst Haeckel tried to integrate Darwin, Lamarck, and Goethe, making Darwinism a lynchpin of his promotion of human progress and opposition to traditional religion. Bowler summarizes his views: “The ultimate direction of evolution [for Haeckel] was always towards progress; man was the highest form produced so far and contained within him seeds of an even greater development.”\textsuperscript{40} Haeckel also saw mind and matter as aspects of same substance and would be cited by Blavatsky, among others. The Swiss botanist Carl von Nageli (1817-1891) proposed that an “inner perfecting principle” directed human evolution toward “nonadaptive goals,” an example, according to Bowler, of “what would later be called orthogenesis.”\textsuperscript{41}

Lingering questions about the cause of variation and the mechanism of heredity supported those who cast doubt on Darwin’s theories. He could not explain how characteristics in adult males—for example, a beard—could be passed down from a grandfather through a mother to a son. He developed the theory of pangenesis in 1865,

\textsuperscript{37} See Bowler 1984, 179.
\textsuperscript{38} Bowler 1984, 183.
\textsuperscript{39} Bowler 1984, 186.
\textsuperscript{40} 1984, 189.
\textsuperscript{41} 1984, 254.
and published it in *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* in 1868. He proposed that “gemmules” were produced in each part of the body and mixed from each parent by way of sexual reproduction. The theory of gemmules is an embarrassment for Darwin’s modern hagiographers. It never gained much traction and was eventually rejected as a type of cloning. But difficulties in the theory notwithstanding, by the 1880s, at least in Great Britain, most naturalists had accepted Darwinian natural selection despite its significant problems and the differences that remained between Darwin, T.H. Huxley, and Wallace, among others.

*Morality, Culture, and Descent*

Both *Origin* and *The Descent of Man* were broadly critiqued for their supposed deleterious implications for morality and civilization. Darwin’s description of the “law” of biological transformation as favoring the strong over the weak—“one general law, leading to the advancement of all organic beings, namely, multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die” quickly led to application in contemporary debates about the morality of colonialism and of aid to the poor. Darwin himself did not carefully delineate between biological and social questions, or the meaning of “fittest,” and he had been unprepared for the way various thinkers would develop his ideas into forms of social Darwinism. The opinions of his co-discoverser, Wallace, demonstrated that more than one conclusion about social life could be drawn from natural selection. Wallace became an active socialist, whereas Darwin’s promoter T.H. Huxley was a conservative. Wallace

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42 See Geison 1969.
43 2006 (1859), 605.
44 See Rogers 1972.
also drew on Malthus but characterized the struggle as taking place between populations, not individuals, whereas Darwin saw struggle at individual level.\textsuperscript{45}

In spite of the success of natural selection at explaining the biological world, it did not explain the great variety and persistence of seemingly nonadaptive cultural productions or the reasons for the success of the hairless and weak human over all other animals. The famous geologist Charles Lyell published a book in 1863 that attempted to blend Spencer and Darwin, and suggested that a higher intelligence might have guided the evolution of humans and animals towards an “ever-increasing dominion of mind over matter.”\textsuperscript{46}

In 1864, Wallace, who had been a leader, along with Huxley, in supporting and popularizing Darwin, gave an address to the Anthropological Society of London, proposing that “mind” was a quality that had made man “superior to nature,” able to till the soil and escape the elements, thus exempting him from natural selection.\textsuperscript{47} In 1869, in the \textit{Quarterly Review}, Wallace went much further, suggesting by analogy that just as humans could alter the development of plant and animal species through selection, a “Higher Intelligence” may have guided the laws of science. Observing that even the most savage of humans was born with a brain that was much larger than that of primates, he declared that the cranium of primitive humans, which was equivalent to that of modern man, incorporated unused brain capacity that could not have been a simple adaptation. In addition, he pointed out, various adaptations, such as the absence of body hair in humans, clearly did not confer a survival advantage against animals, and suggested the

\textsuperscript{45} See Bowler 1984, 174.
\textsuperscript{46} From Lyell’s \textit{Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man}, quoted in Slotten 2004, 218.
involvement of a design process. He called the “mind of man” the “living proof of a supreme mind.”

In 1870, Wallace published a book of essays, *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection*, in which the chapter “The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man” particularly distanced him from Darwin. Wallace engaged in detailed speculations on what factors other than natural selection could account for the differences between humans and other animals. He attacked materialist theories that had begun to be put forward by Huxley, and brought in elements that suggested German nature philosophy and vitalism. He proposed that matter itself might have a kind of consciousness, and suggested it “not…improbable” that human will might be an analog for some larger “will-force” operated by “higher intelligences” or “one Supreme Intelligence” and of “infinite possibilities of existence…totally distinct from, yet as real as, what we term matter.”

Wallace suggested that “we must therefore admit the possibility that, if we are not the highest intelligences in the universe, some higher intelligence may have directed the process by which the human race was developed, by means of more subtle agencies than we are acquainted with.” He admitted the theory was disadvantaged by reliance on a “distinct individual intelligence,” thus suggesting an insufficiency in the laws of the “material universe,” but proposed that it is possible that multiple higher intelligences are in fact a part of a fundamental law underlying “natural selection,” which may lie “too deep for us to discover it.” If his proposal were true, he asserted, he could not admit that

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it “in any degree affects the truth or generality of Mr. Darwin’s great discovery.”

Wallace, who in 1861 had pronounced himself an opponent of “blind faith” and an “utter disbeliever” in most religious truth claims, and presented cogent attacks on biblical creationism, yet developed his own form of what is often today called theistic evolutionism. There are great differences, however, between the “theistic” evolutionism of Wallace and others with esoteric leanings and those more aligned with traditional and institutional religious sensibilities, and we will continue to tease out those differences. Wallace’s evolutionism has been called teleological, though Charles H. Smith argues that it was neither deterministic nor pre-destined. We will return to Wallace in chapter 4, along with his interest in spiritualism, which informed some of his arguments. Wallace did not think that there was a large gap between his position and Darwin’s, writing that they agreed on nineteen out of twenty points. However, for Darwin and Huxley, that last point was larger than all the rest.

Any type of design, Darwin concluded, was incompatible with natural selection. In 1870 he wrote, “I cannot look at the universe as the result of blind chance, yet I can see no evidence of beneficent design, or indeed design of any kind, in the details.” In Descent of Man, Darwin addressed Wallace’s critique, taking pains to demonstrate that in spite of the great gap between human and animal cognition, the rudiments of the same mental powers found in man could be found in animals—such as reason, imagination, dreaming, tool use, learning (as seen in the avoidance of traps), language, increase in

52 Cited in Fichman 2004, 34.
54 Slotten 2004, 288.
55 McCalla 2006, 111.
brain size over time, sense of beauty and love of novelty, and belief in unseen agency such as spirits.\textsuperscript{56}

Darwin publicly critiqued Wallace’s views, though they remained friends and colleagues throughout Darwin’s life.\textsuperscript{57} In Descent of Man, he brought up Wallace’s 1869 Quarterly Review article, which stated that “natural selection could only have endowed the savage with a brain a little superior to that of an ape.”\textsuperscript{58} Cooking and fire-building, Darwin replied, are “the direct result of the development of his powers of observation, memory, curiosity, imagination, and reason.”\textsuperscript{59} Darwin argued that “there is no fundamental difference” in the mental powers of humans and animals. The question of the origins of life was beyond his scope, however, and he concluded that it was “[h]opeless” to inquire “in what manner the mental powers were first developed in the lowest organisms…. These are problems for the distant future, if they are ever to be solved by man.”\textsuperscript{60}

But he thought it entirely relevant to inquire as to how these powers changed over time: “To maintain, independently of any direct evidence, that no animal during the course of ages has progressed in intellect or other mental faculties, is to beg the question of the evolution of species.”\textsuperscript{61} And further, “It is, therefore, highly probable that with mankind the intellectual faculties have been gradually perfected through natural selection; and this conclusion is sufficient for our purpose.”\textsuperscript{62} However, as Bowler remarks, in Descent of Man Darwin “greatly exaggerated the human qualities of animals”

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{56} 2006 (1871), 804, 807, 806, 808–13, 807, 814, 815.
\item\textsuperscript{57} Fichman 2004, 149.
\item\textsuperscript{58} Cited in Darwin 2006 (1871), 855.
\item\textsuperscript{59} 2006 (1871), 855.
\item\textsuperscript{60} 2006 (1871), 798.
\item\textsuperscript{61} 2006 (1871), 807.
\item\textsuperscript{62} 2006 (1871), 868.
\end{itemize}
in an attempt to make his case.63

In partial response to criticisms of Wallace and others, in *Descent of Man* Darwin also addressed the question of culture and social organization. He allowed that the question of how “the first advance of savages towards civilization” had occurred was “too difficult to be solved.” However, once it had occurred, civilization took a generally upward trajectory, though there had most likely also been periods of decline.64 He concluded, “It is apparently a truer and more cheerful view that progress has been much more general than retrogression; that man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals, and religion.”65

And finally, with a statement that would greatly please some evolutionary esotericists, he concurred with Chambers’s optimistic view of the future of the species, as well as his own “no limit” statement in *Origin*. Man has no “definite limit,” he wrote, in “continued development of the brain and mental faculties.”66 Continuing in this vein, Darwin celebrated the human’s position at the apex of life: “Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his having thus risen, instead of having been aboriginally placed there, may give him hopes for a still higher destiny in the distant future.”67

Although brutality and amorality are often seen as essential components of

64 See 2006 (1871), 872.
65 2006 (1871), 881.
66 2006 (1871), 885.
67 2006 (1871), 1248.
Darwinism, thanks largely to the narratives of social Darwinism, Darwin actually argued that both morality and religion had a positive adaptive nature and could contribute to group survival and that culture and the advancement of knowledge would lead to the progress of the human species. He even declared, in contrast to twentieth-century selfish gene theories, that the failure to pass along the inherited nature among the saintly and others who die without offspring did not damage the species, for the founders of “beneficent religions, great philosophers and discoverers in science, aid the progress of mankind in a far higher degree by their works than by leaving a numerous progeny.” He also allowed that “it is not improbable that virtuous tendencies may through long practice be inherited.” Culture was also important in his vision of life: “Without considerable culture of the mind both in the race and in the individual,” Darwin wrote, “it is doubtful whether these high [mental] powers would be exercised, and thus fully attained.”

He had addressed in *Origin* the question of the relationship between instinct and habit, and concluded that they could mutually influence one another. He wrote of gradations between instinct and habit, pointing out that instincts vary, some profitable, and might be accumulated through natural selection as the conditions of life change. Instinct may inform habit, and vice versa, he wrote, in a sentence that bears on later questions of the role of culture in evolution: “Domestic instincts have been acquired and natural instincts have been lost partly by habit…in most cases, probably, habit and selection have acted together.” In *Descent of Man*, he concluded that “[t]he moral

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68 See 2006 (1871), 872.
69 2006 (1871), 875.
70 2006 (1871), 1241.
71 2006 (1871), 1240.
72 2006 (1859), 583–84.
73 2006 (1859), 588.
qualities are advanced, either directly or indirectly, much more through the effects of habit, the reasoning powers, instruction, religion, &c., than through natural selection” though social instincts derive from natural selection.74

Darwin’s explanations of the social implications of his theory may have answered some of the concerns raised by Wallace. But others in Darwin’s circle had already felt it necessary to take further steps in response to Wallace’s vitalistic trajectory by tackling the question Darwin had avoided—that of the origins of life.

**Materialist Polemics**

No doubt to counter the influence of Wallace, Lyell, and others who may have sought to harmonize biology with religion or spiritualism, T.H. Huxley engaged in a series of polemics that sought to resolve, once and for all, the question of a non-physical agency operating in human life. It was not enough to dispense with biblical creation and the more recent deist compromise that allowed multiple special creations. All supernatural explanations had to go. Huxley and the physicist John Tyndall were chief among these polemicists, and we will here briefly examine their work in order to set the stage for the response by evolutionary esotericists.

Huxley’s article “On the Physical Basis of Life,” published in *The Fortnightly Review* of February 1869 (delivered as an address in November 1868 in Edinburgh) marks the opening salvo in this battle. Huxley began by claiming that the scientific term “protoplasm” could be translated as “the physical basis of life,” and challenging the conception that life is “something which works through matter, but is independent of

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74 2006 (1871), 1247.
it.”

The alternative is that “there is some one kind of matter which is common to all living beings, and that their endless diversities are bound together by a physical, as well as an ideal, unity.”

Attempting to link the lowest branches on the tree of evolution with the highest, Huxley asked, “what community of form, or structure, is there between the animalcule [a common term for microscopic animals] and the whale, or between the fungus and the fig-tree? And, a fortiori, between all four?” He proposed to “demonstrate…that, notwithstanding these apparent difficulties, a threefold unity—namely, a unity of power or faculty, a unity of form, and a unity of substantial composition—does pervade the whole living world.”

Famously, he addressed the question of the higher qualities of human life such as intellect, feeling, and will, claiming that they could be reduced to “transitory changes in the relative positions of parts of the body,” i.e., muscular contraction. He compared their action to the contraction of the parts of plants, as influenced by heat and electric shocks, and set forth a view of matter as controlled by reflexive action, the corpuscles in blood acting as “independent organisms,” all animals composed of “masses of protoplasm with a nucleus,” and embryonic humans as “nothing but an aggregation of such corpuscles.”

In maintaining that the same rules applied to all forms of life, Huxley addressed the question of a boundary line between the plant and animal kingdoms, which he

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75 T.H. Huxley 1869, 3.
76 T.H. Huxley 1869, 3.
77 T.H. Huxley 1869, 6.
78 T.H. Huxley 1869, 6.
79 T.H. Huxley 1869, 6–7.
80 T.H. Huxley 1869, 9–10.
claimed was impossible to draw, given that all forms of “protoplasm” contain carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, and behave similarly.\textsuperscript{81} All life is constantly in a state of dying but can also replenish itself by consuming other life—for example, a sheep eats grass and becomes mutton. The vegetable world builds up protoplasm to keep the animal world going.\textsuperscript{82} Huxley criticized vitalist positions such as Wallace’s, arguing that applying the vague concept “vitality” to protoplasm would be as unscientific as would be applying a quality of “aquosity” to water.\textsuperscript{83} The qualities of protoplasm, he affirmed, could be explained solely by the “nature and disposition of its molecules.”\textsuperscript{84}

Surprisingly, he rejected the label of “materialist,” and stated that the question of materialism is outside the limits of philosophical inquiry.\textsuperscript{85} Nevertheless, he attempted to stake out a territory for science that incorporated all elements of physical life. Science, he explained, depends on the “extension of the province of what we call matter and causation, and the concomitant gradual banishment from all regions of human thought of what we call spirit and spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{86} He offered hope that the future would bring the same kind of “control over the world of thought as we already possess in respect of the material world; whereas, the alternative, or spiritualistic, terminology is utterly barren, and leads to nothing but obscurity and confusion of ideas.”\textsuperscript{87}

In spite of Huxley’s refusal of the label “materialist,” his very public embrace of what was perceived as dogmatic materialism made him the most visible proponent of what may be more neutrally termed “scientific naturalism.” His stance was seen as a call

\textsuperscript{81} T.H. Huxley 1869, 12.
\textsuperscript{82} T.H. Huxley 1869, 15.
\textsuperscript{83} T.H. Huxley 1869, 17.
\textsuperscript{84} T.H. Huxley 1869, 17.
\textsuperscript{85} T.H. Huxley 1869, 22.
\textsuperscript{86} T.H. Huxley 1869, 20.
\textsuperscript{87} T.H. Huxley 1869, 23.
to arms by religious thinkers as well as spiritualists, who were at the very moment attempting to extend the boundaries of science to encompass the world of spirit. Huxley understood that many were threatened by the “progress of materialism” and fear of debasement of morals, and he went on to deliver a lecture on evolution and ethics in 1893. He also delivered three lectures in New York in September 1876, where Blavatsky was then living and at work on her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, which was published in 1877. In New York, he restated some of his conclusions from 1869, defending protoplasm as the foundation of all biological life, and stirring widespread debate in the United States.

In 1875, the physicist John Tyndall (1820-1893) became the next most visible warrior in the battle of scientific naturalism against spirit, delivering his “Belfast Address” before the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He defended science for its demand of “radical extirpation of caprice” and “absolute reliance upon law in nature.” Tyndall’s address, most often known for its elevation of science over religion, is also known for its defense of Darwin, Wallace, and Huxley.

Tyndall’s defense of science began with a celebration of rationality, which he sought to trace in an ascending arc from the Greeks Democritus, Empedocles, and Lucretius through Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Francis Bacon, and David Hume to the present. Each of these figures, as he portrayed them, opposed superstition and belief in non-material forces and supported empirical science. The “mysticism of the Middle Ages, Magic, Alchemy, the Neo-platonic philosophy, with its visionary though sublime

88 T.H. Huxley 1869, 21.
89 T.H. Huxley 1886 (1876), 10.
90 Tyndall 1915 (1875), 137.
91 See Tyndall 1915 (1875), 173–74.
abstractions, which caused men to look with shame upon their own bodies as hindrances to the absorption of the creature in the blessedness of the Creator,” he dubbed “an exercise of the phantasy,” which took the place of “scientific speculation.”

Scientists were not all free of superstition, Tyndall admitted, and some, such as Newton, should have stuck to matters in which they were competent, rather than attempting to take up “theological and historic questions.” Under Tyndall’s pen, Bruno became one of the saints of rationality through revival of “the notion of the infinity of worlds,” and conclusion that “fixed stars are suns.” (Blavatsky attacked Tyndall for failing to recognize Bruno’s mystical and pantheistic beliefs, including his support for metempsychosis, though Tyndall did admit in a footnote to his published address that “Bruno was a ‘Pantheist,’ not an ‘Atheist’ or a ‘Materialist.’”)

Against the superstition of the alchemists and Neoplatonists, Tyndall placed ancient Greek atomic theory and Darwin’s theory of evolution. In some passages, Tyndall addressed questions that remain salient today in the debate over the brain and consciousness, mind and body, mechanism and vitalism, and were certainly the same types of questions that perplexed both Myers and Blavatsky. Critiquing Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler’s eighteenth-century attempt to demonstrate that a “self” could exist outside the body, Tyndall set forth an imaginary debate between Lucretius (his hero) and the bishop concerning the location and destiny of the self when the mind was either diseased or unconscious. “Is consciousness, then, a necessary element of the true self?”

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92 Tyndall 1915 (1875), 147.
93 Tyndall 1915 (1875), 148.
94 Tyndall 1915 (1875), 154.
95 Tyndall 1915 (1875), 192n1.
asks the Lucretian disciple.\textsuperscript{96} If the brain is empowered by “immortal reason,” how can acts of “extravagance and crime” be explained? In fact, the brain cannot be a disembodied instrument, for it is subject to “excess or defect” of blood, argues the Lucretian.\textsuperscript{97} Myers would go on to reference this argument of Tyndall, for he was also quite concerned with the relationship between mind, body, and the self.

Unlike Huxley, Tyndall offered a less certain defense of materialism, having his bishop respond to the Lucretian, “You cannot satisfy the human understanding in its demand for logical continuity between molecular processes and the phenomena of consciousness. This is a rock on which Materialism must inevitably split whenever it pretends to be a complete philosophy of life.” For the bishop, as imagined by Tyndall, the “moral” was that “both sides” should avoid “anger and vituperation,” and hope that “what is good and true in both our arguments will be preserved for the benefit of humanity.”\textsuperscript{98}

Tyndall continued his address by focusing on Darwin’s conclusion that life goes back to a single primordial form. Since the idea of multiple creations had been discredited, he argued, the idea of a single creation should be similarly dismissed.\textsuperscript{99} However, he acknowledged the deficiencies in atomic theory as it presently stood, and suggested that the definition of matter itself might be flawed, created as it was by mathematicians and not biologists: “Divorced from matter, where is life to be found? Whatever our faith may say, our knowledge shows them to be indissolubly joined. Every meal we eat, and every cup we drink, illustrates the mysterious control of Mind by

\textsuperscript{96} Tyndall 1915 (1875), 164.
\textsuperscript{97} Tyndall 1915 (1875), 166.
\textsuperscript{98} Tyndall 1915 (1875), 169.
\textsuperscript{99} Tyndall 1915 (1875), 189–90.
Matter.”¹⁰⁰

Tyndall declared himself unable to answer questions about the nature of matter raised by Lucretius (Nature acts spontaneously and without the gods) and Bruno (Matter is the “universal mother”), but “[b]elieving, as I do, in the continuity of nature, I cannot stop abruptly where our microscopes cease to be of use. Here the vision of the mind authoritatively supplements the vision of the eye.”¹⁰¹ He concluded with the thought that the evolution of life on earth is “an insoluble mystery” but that “[t]he strength of the doctrine of Evolution consists, not in an experimental demonstration…but in its general harmony with scientific thought.”¹⁰² He expanded the claim of science into traditionally religious territory by asserting that “science claims unrestricted right of search” into such questions as human origins, without making “exclusive claim” or becoming an “idol.” Materialism, he argued, was a field for both the “knowing” and the “creative faculties of man.”¹⁰³

This address, though at the time taken as an intolerable affront to religion and spiritualism, appears to modern eyes hardly an example of strict materialism. Stephen Kim calls Tyndall’s philosophy “transcendental materialism,” and points out that he had been influenced by German idealism and that his support for the “scientific use of imagination” put him “outside of hard materialism.”¹⁰⁴ For Tyndall, unlike for Spencer or Tylor, Kim contends, an ideal or invisible world was a possibility.

As a promoter of “scientific naturalism,” which replaced natural theology in the

¹⁰⁰ Tyndall 1915 (1875), 190.
¹⁰¹ Tyndall 1915 (1875), 191.
¹⁰² Tyndall 1915 (1875), 194.
¹⁰³ Tyndall 1915 (1875), 201.
¹⁰⁴ 1996, 4n6.
minds of many educated Victorians, Tyndall was both a major figure in the triumph of scientific over religious discourse as well as emblematic of the struggle to find common ground between religion and science. His attempt to claim the entire universe as the ground of science provoked a quick reply. In 1875, an anonymous work entitled *Unseen Universe: or Physical Speculations on a Future State*, was published. The authors were later identified as Balfour Stewart and P.G. Tait, two Scottish physicists. According to P.M. Heimann, “Stewart and Tait clearly intended their book as a refutation of John Tyndall’s ‘Belfast Address’ of 1874.” They were influential, and Blavatsky quoted Stewart as well as the (then anonymous) *Unseen Universe*.

Stewart and Tait attempted to promote a law-based and scientific alternative to materialism. As Heimann puts it,

> They rejected any attempt to separate the natural from the miraculous. Arguing that the natural order included an invisible realm which was in communication with the visible universe, they explained the manifestations of divine providence in terms of the transfer of energy from the invisible to the visible realm. They rejected Baden Powell’s separation of the natural and supernatural, for they explained the intervention of divine providence as occurring under the operation of natural laws.\(^{106}\)

Stewart and Tait used the “principle of Continuity” and second law of thermodynamics to argue that an “unseen universe” existed independently of and was in communication

\(^{105}\) 1972, 73.  
\(^{106}\) 1972, 75–76.
with the visible universe,” Heimann writes.\textsuperscript{107}

Through the efforts of scientists such as Stewart and Tait, as well as pushback by Anglican dons, by the 1880s the trend was away from Huxley’s materialism and towards vitalist conceptions of nature. Bowler sums up the conclusion of the Victorian-era debates over materialism. “The majority of scientists and theologians tried to find a middle ground by modifying the structure of Darwinism so that evolution itself could be seen as an essentially purposeful process.” Their compromise position was the notion that “evolution is guided toward adaptation and progress by some kind of supernatural power,” also known as “theistic evolutionism.”\textsuperscript{108} So far had the climate shifted that Huxley scaled back his attacks on religion. Bowler writes: “By the end of his career, even T.H. Huxley tried to distance himself from this kind of outright hostility to religion. He remained on amicable terms with the religious thinkers who frequented the Metaphysical Society’s after-dinner discussions.”\textsuperscript{109}

“Theistic evolutionism” represented a spectrum of proposals. Though all “vitalist” ideas may be called religious or “theistic” today, they were held by many outside of institutionalized religion, and became fundamental to systems that claimed to be entirely scientific. Bowler describes the intellectual climate of late-Victorian Britain:

Anti-Darwinian evolutionary theories postulated ‘creative’ forces in nature driving it toward morally significant goals. Vitalistic physiology flourished again, reviving the old idea that life was a force existing apart from the mechanical functioning of the body. These theories invoked what the

\textsuperscript{107} 1972, 77.
\textsuperscript{108} Bowler 1984, 208.
\textsuperscript{109} Bowler 2001, 19. For more on mechanism and vitalism in Victorian science, see Garland Allen 2005.
rationalists had dismissed as the supernatural, and they were regarded as the key to a new philosophy in which nature was directed by the nonphysical agents of life and mind. In physics, the theory of the ether was regarded as the basis for a nonatomistic worldview...Such ideas were promoted by a conservative segment of the academic community...This was the era of the ‘revolution of the dons,’ in which idealism became the symbol of the universities’ determination to resist the move to regard applied science as the basis for education. It was also an era that saw a renewed interest in spiritualism and psychical research. Both [Arthur] Balfour and the physicist Oliver Lodge supported the latter movement. Meanwhile superstition, astrology, and occult religions such as Theosophy gained a new lease of life in popular culture.110

It is to Theosophy that we now turn, contextualized by our tour of nineteenth-century thought. It will become apparent that neither Blavatsky nor Myers can be evaluated outside the debates over scientific naturalism or the context of the “new” natural theology that emerged post-Darwin and flourished until the end of the nineteenth century.

**Table 12: Natural Selection and Evolution in the Nineteenth Century**

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Variation tends to advantage in the struggle for existence, and propagation of successful varieties (Darwin and Wallace).</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Natural selection means strong survive and weak die, resulting in the “survival of the fittest” (Spencer and Darwin).</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Natural selection is similar to human domestic cultivation and breeding programs (Darwin and Wallace).</td>
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4. Natural selection is superior to human efforts to improve species (Darwin).

5. All animals descended from less complex forms, and one or a few progenitors (Darwin 1859).

6. Body and mind, "corporeal and mental endowments," tend to progress towards perfection and more recent forms are "higher" than "the more ancient" (Darwin 1859).

7. Organic progress leads to "greater differentiation and specialization" (Darwin on von Baer).

8. There is "no limit" to the "amount of change" and "complexity of…co-adaptations between organic beings" (Darwin 1859).

9. Variation results from both "natural selection" and the "conditions of life," but the amount of influence is unclear (Darwin).

10. Habit and instinct may become "blended together" (Darwin 1859, 1871).

11. Rudimentary and vestigial organs are evidence that increased or diminished use influence natural selection (Darwin 1871) and may be inherited (Darwin 1872).

12. Humans have an "inner perfecting principle" (von Nageli).

13. Struggle is among populations, not individuals (Wallace).


15. A "Higher Intelligence" guided the evolution of humans, resulting in their distinction from animals (Lyell 1863, Wallace 1869).

16. Human mental powers require cultivation to be fully realized and culture advances moral qualities more than natural selection (Darwin 1871).

17. Morality and religion contribute to group survival and "virtuous tendencies" may be inherited (Darwin 1871).
Chapter 4: The Evolution of Blavatsky’s “Double” Evolution

If, somewhere, in the line of ascent from vegetable or ascidian to the noblest man a soul was evolved, gifted with intellectual qualities, it cannot be unreasonable to infer and believe that a faculty of perception is also growing in man, enabling him to descry facts and truths even beyond our ordinary ken.

—Helena Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled.¹

Helena Blavatsky’s conceptual blending proved hugely influential in the development of evolutionary esotericisms, and underlies the systems evaluated here. She is the first writer post-Darwin to begin using the phrase “double evolution” to describe a process of spiritual transformation that she viewed as operating in tandem with the physical transformation of the human species.² She looked to Wallace for permission to blend theological and scientific ideas, but her system was much more elaborate than the essentially spiritualist one that he developed, and included detailed depictions of the process by which “higher intelligence” had endowed body with soul. Although her evolutionary visions are filled with contradictions, they offer a fascinating glimpse of a new theology in the making, built from pieces of Western esotericism, Eastern systems filtered through a Western lens, and reference to a wide range of what was then current scientific and medical research, including electricity, magnetism, and hypnotism.

¹ 1960 (1877) 1:v.
² The earliest reference that I have been able to locate so far is a February 1876 letter from Blavatsky to C.C. Massey, a founding member of the Theosophical Society. She wrote of “spirit keeping pace with the evolution of matter…. When this double evolution has reached a certain point, it is possible for their principle to come into the union with the immortal spirit, which makes of man a Triad” (cited in Lavoie 2012, 135).
Blavatsky called her system “scientific” and made an earnest attempt to marry science and religion, a not uncommon goal at the time. But her allegiance clearly lay with the esoteric systems, which though she claimed to follow faithfully, she was in reality updating to conform with or even challenge contemporary scientific developments, especially the strict materialism of the 1870s. Her goal was to draw a coherent picture of human destiny that would also account for spiritualist phenomena and appeal to popular interest in Eastern religion.

Blavatsky’s life was filled with controversy, and has been the topic of numerous biographies and critical studies, ranging from the worshipful to the academic to the skeptical. A brief summary is in order, particularly as Myers and Blavatsky were acquainted, and their relationship ended after one of the most widely publicized controversies of her life. In addition, Blavatsky and other members of her Theosophical Society had some influence on Myers’s ideas about spiritual evolution, a connection that is traced in chapter 7.

Born into a Russian noble family in 1831, Helena von Hahn displayed psychic and mediumistic abilities from an early age, as documented in Madame Blavatsky, the Woman Behind the Myth by Marion Meade (1980), probably the best biography to date written neither by a hostile skeptic nor a follower. Helena’s mother was a well-known novelist who defied convention, her grandmother a naturalist, and her great-grandfather possessed an impressive esoteric library, of which Helena made use in her youth. Running away from an early marriage, she travelled through Europe and the Middle East,

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3 For more on Blavatsky’s attitudes towards science, see Egil Asprem 2014, 444–52.
collecting friends and esoteric knowledge, and demonstrating her own psychic abilities, which she struggled to understand. She landed in the United States in 1873, where she soon met Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, a lawyer and journalist. They began working together out of a mutual interest in studying and redirecting the intense fascination with spiritualism then sweeping the country.

Blavatsky styled herself as an anti-spiritualist but in reality she incorporated a number of the main tenets of spiritualism, including, at least initially, the lack of a requirement for beliefs, the equality of men and women, a claim to be scientific, and the idea that communication with unseen beings occurred in accordance with natural laws, much like a “spiritual telegraph,” or through harnessing invisible forces possibly connected with electricity and magnetism.

It was while investigating spiritualist activity that Blavatsky had met Olcott—at the Eddy farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont, in 1873. In 1875, during a meeting in Blavatsky’s rooms of about seventeen individuals interested in what was beginning to be called “the occult,” the decision was made to found the Theosophical Society, of which Olcott became the first president and Blavatsky the corresponding secretary. Several members of this early group were spiritualists, including Emma Hardinge Britten, the celebrated trance speaker mentioned in chapter 2. In its early years, the society was driven primarily by Blavatsky’s powerful personality. In 1877, she published *Isis Unveiled*, her first major work (edited and organized by Olcott), which first propounded her theory of a “double” evolution.

*Isis* was, according to historian Glenn Campbell, “an immediate success. A first edition of one thousand copies sold out in ten days. Within a year, all copies of two
reprints had also been sold. It has continued to sell well for a century, the total copies now numbering about half a million,”⁵ he wrote in 1980. Campbell ascribes its popularity to its ability to satisfy those trying to make sense of the scientific challenges to religion and to understand non-Christian religions. “[I]ts readership has been composed to a large extent of educated persons to whom religion is important but who have become estranged from established religious organizations.”⁶ In an introduction, the book’s aim is stated succinctly as the rescue of the public from both materialist science and dogmatic religion: “Between these two conflicting Titans—Science and Theology—is a bewildered public, fast losing all belief in man’s personal immortality, in a deity of any kind, and rapidly descending to the level of a mere animal existence.”⁷

Isis also led to Blavatsky’s first major public controversy, charges that she had plagiarized large portions of it, and had cited classical sources as original which she had actually copied from secondary works. William Emmett Coleman evaluated Isis and claimed that all of her quotations were taken from “about 100 books…nearly all current nineteenth-century literature.”⁸ Olcott agreed she had included a large number of citations without credit, but that these were drawn from “the Astral Light.”⁹ Eventually, however, Olcott admitted that Blavatsky’s library at the time included the volumes identified by Coleman and that she “has sinned an hundred times against the canons of literary usage” by using “other men’s writings as though they were her own.”¹⁰

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⁵ Campbell 1980, 35.
⁶ Campbell 1980, 36.
⁷ Blavatsky 1960 (1877), 1:x.
⁸ Coleman 1895, 354.
⁹ Quoted in Campbell 1980, 34.
¹⁰ Meade 1980, 169, citing Olcott’s Old Diary Leaves, 1895. For more on the controversy surrounding Blavatsky’s sources, see Coleman 1895; Campbell 1980, 32–35; Cranston 1993, 379–87; Goodrick-Clarke 2013, 288–89; and Winchester 2015.
Isis often praised the wisdom of India, and quoted extensively from translations of Hindu scriptures. Olcott and Blavatsky were soon contacted by members of a Vedic-centered Hindu reformist organization known as Arya Samaj, who invited them for a visit. In 1878, they sailed for India where, over the next several years, they attracted enough support to establish a headquarters in Adyar, near Madras, and a total of eighty-seven branches on the subcontinent. By associating openly with Indians they upset British colonial society, but also received support from Westerners in India and elsewhere who were open to taking Eastern religion seriously.

Much of what has been written about the Theosophical Society has centered on Blavatsky’s claim to have been instructed by Eastern adepts, “masters,” Mahatmas, and other “initiates” of secret knowledge, which emerged early in her work. She referred to them as “adepts” in Isis, but it was not until she travelled to India that she began identifying them as “Mahatmas.” The largest controversy of Blavatsky’s life surrounded the purported correspondence between various members of the Theosophical Society and the Mahatmas—the two most prominent of whom she called by their initials M. and K.H. Handwritten letters signed with these initials and penned in several handwriting styles, none of which matches Blavatsky’s, were addressed primarily to A. P. Sinnett, a newspaper editor Blavatsky had met in India, who subsequently returned to England where he became an important figure in the popularization of Theosophy and was also acquainted with Myers.

The “Mahatma” letters were delivered to Sinnett sometimes by the prosaic postal service, but also in unusual and seemingly miraculous ways, including falling from the ceiling of a moving railway carriage. The authorship of the letters has been hotly debated,
with most assuming they were written by Blavatsky herself, perhaps with the assistance of an Indian follower. There is evidence to suggest that Blavatsky committed fraud in arranging for the delivery of at least some of these letters in ways that were meant to appear miraculous. As Meade writes, “[o]n at least two occasions she seems to have hired individuals to impersonate her Mahatmic entities.”

In 1884, Blavatsky and Olcott visited England and interacted with members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The two societies shared certain aims, including support for scientific research into mesmeric and psychic phenomena as well as a suspicion of spiritualist claims. The SPR instituted an investigation of the phenomena associated with Blavatsky. Matters were moving along cordially when allegations from India arrived, statements by Emma and Charles Coulomb, a housekeeper and handyman who worked at the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar. They claimed that they had assisted in the artificial production of phenomena, including installing secret panels in a “shrine,” in which letters from Mahatmas were said to have miraculously appeared. The Coulombs produced letters allegedly written by Blavatsky instructing them how to assist her in the fraud. Blavatsky claimed the letters were forgeries and out-of-context bits of discarded correspondence.

The so-called Coulomb Affair discredited Blavatsky in the minds of nineteenth-century elites. Richard Hodgson, sent by the SPR to India to investigate the Coulomb allegations, issued a damaging official report in December 1885, published in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research. The committee investigating Blavatsky memorably characterized her as “one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and

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11 1980, 462.
interesting imposters in history.”

This conclusion ensured that whatever possibilities there had been for collaboration between the Theosophical Society and the SPR disappeared, and that most (but not all) Theosophists dissociated themselves from the SPR.

However, since the 1880s, other investigators have questioned whether Hodgson was overly hasty and placed too much weight on the testimony of the Coulombs, which was organized and promoted by Christian missionaries. By 1968, as described by historian Michael Gomes, “Robert Thouless, a past president of the S.P.R., admitted…in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* that Hodgson’s Report was flawed” and that Hodgson had made procedural errors. Thouless also pointed out that Hodgson’s conclusions were his own and not those of every member of the Society. Trevor Hamilton summarizes additional evidence undermining the credibility of the Coulombs and the evaluation of Hodgson. In 1997, Vernon Harrison, a long-term member of the SPR, published an investigation of the Hodgson report in which he concluded that it was “flawed and untrustworthy,” and that Blavatsky’s case “needs re-examination in this light.”

The controversy is of little importance to a strictly historical and literary evaluation of Blavatsky’s work, but there does remain the objection that, although Hodgson’s report evaluated the phenomena surrounding Blavatsky in India during her employment of the Coulombs, it did not evaluate the phenomena that preceded and post-

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12 Cited in Gomes 2005, 14.
13 Gomes 2005, iv.
14 Price 1986, 11.
16 Harrison 1997, xxi.
dated her association with them. As Meade writes, the SPR had “investigated the
Theosophical Society but did not test H.P.B.” As for the Mahatma letters themselves,
they display if not Blavatsky’s handwriting, then a concern with matters of interest to
Victorian spiritualists and Theosophists, and not necessarily to Indian holy men. Thus, I
will argue, they can and should be taken as part of her overall oeuvre. They seem most
likely to be channeled works by her, which reflected differing personalities and points of
view, of which more discussion in chapter 5.

Channeling is a term that did not begin to be used until the twentieth century to
describe a variety of phenomena, including automatic writing and the verbalizations of
mediums during seances. Similarities exist between these modern phenomena and
revelation or prophecy. From an academic standpoint, identifying written material as
“channeled” does not mean the postulation of a divine or exterior source. Rather, it means
evaluating the production of the material as a human phenomena. Often there is evidence
that the material emerged during a process, sometimes trance-related, in which the author
felt inspired or inhabited by an exterior entity or secondary self, and was able to produce
material that seemed beyond the author’s capacity in terms of complexity or style.

Concerning Blavatsky’s actual psychic abilities, Meade concludes that “she was a
genuine sensitive,” as documented by family members early in her life, and she
experienced “other personalities,” which at times “seemed to be colonizing her body.”

17 1980, 463.
18 Harrison noted that the originals of the letters allegedly written by Blavatsky instructing the Coulombs in
their deception, which were provided by the Coulombs, had disappeared, preventing an evaluation as to
their authenticity, and that Blavatsky had “never had” the “fair hearing” to which she was entitled (1997, 7, 33).
19 See Hughes 1991 for an analysis of channeling from an anthropological standpoint. See also Krippner
and Friedman, eds., 2010.
She did not begin attaching names to these personalities until later in life. Meade’s approach falls somewhere between evaluating Blavatsky as a fraud and a divinely inspired revelator. “My own guess is that unusually strong hypnotic powers may account for some of her phenomena,” Meade continues, concluding “she did indeed possess genuine psi powers to a degree but they fell far short of the miraculous productions with which some have credited her.” It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate whether such “psi powers” exist, but the reader may be interested in pursuing contemporary research that also takes a middle stance between those who proclaim the truth of paranormal activity and those who dismiss it outright.

Meade speculates that Blavatsky’s interest in the esoteric arose out of a desire to understand her own strange experiences. Two strong themes in Blavatsky’s work were probably influenced by this desire. First, her attempt to differentiate her own work from the production of spiritualist mediums, much of which she saw as trivial, and second, her conviction that the triviality could be accounted for by understanding spiritualism as something other than what it claimed to be. Her writings can be evaluated for their ideas alone—almost all of which came from books to which she had access, and would not require supernatural knowledge or abilities. But the presentation and combination of the ideas was new, and that is the conceptual blending of interest to this study.

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Isis Unveiled as Rhetoric

Although *Isis* has been evaluated by historians for its sources and by those more faithful to the religious claims of Theosophy as a piece of revealed literature, it has not been fully evaluated from the rhetorical and creative standpoint that I adopt. Such an evaluation provides insight into the continued popularity of this arcane and rambling twelve-hundred-page work, which has stayed in print for a hundred and fifty years.

As literature, *Isis* fails miserably. So too as scientific writing. But it achieves a certain power if evaluated as an exercise in theological proof, an attempt to blend deinstitutionalized salvation with scientific and Enlightenment values. It swings wildly between on the one hand, a dogmatic insistence that the ancient sages are the source of universal Truth, and on the other, attempts to prove that science is now demonstrating the connections between material and spiritual worlds. Its pages refer, directly or indirectly, to many of the figures who have been introduced in previous chapters, including Hermes Trismegistus, Giordano Bruno, and Emmanuel Swedenborg. The vitalist conceptions of Paracelsus and Böhme as restated by Ennemoser take on new life clothed in Blavatsky’s language of evolution, biology, and electro-magnetism.

The Egyptian goddess Isis of the title is a stand-in not only for Truth in the Western esoteric tradition, but also for Nature. Blavatsky herself originally wanted to call the book *The Veil of Isis*, but had to abandon it since there was already a work of that name. But the reference to the goddess evokes not only the obvious connection with ancient Egypt and Hermetic lore but is also an oblique reference to an Enlightenment-era

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discourse about the veiled secrets of the natural world. This discourse was inaugurated in the sixteenth century by the poet Edmund Spenser, who refers to Nature as veiled. In the seventeenth century Athanasius Kircher, a popularizer of esoteric Egypt and a favorite author of Blavatsky’s, directly identified, according to Pierre Hadot, “the veil of Isis as a symbol of the secrets of Nature.”

In the 1820s, invoking a common metaphor of Nature as a many-breasted woman, Goethe wrote:

Respect the mystery;
Let not your eyes give way to lust.
Nature the Sphinx, a monstrous thing,
Will terrify you with her innumerable breasts.
Seek no secret initiation
beneath the veil; leave alone what is fixed.

The historical use of the metaphor of Isis as Nature is described brilliantly by Hadot, who nonetheless does not make a connection with Blavatsky’s famous work, which made the revolutionary claim to have torn the veil from the terrible and wonderful goddess. Blavatsky herself tried to have it both ways, claiming, “I do not reveal the arcane secrets of the dread goddess—Isis.” She elaborated on her choice of title as a way to promote a spiritual approach to the secrets of nature in opposition to the

25 Hadot 2006, 237. The esoteric writer Éliphas Lévi, one of Blavatsky’s sources, also adopts the discourse of Isis as Nature: “The sanctuary of nature is not to be violated with impunity. No one raises the veil of the great Isis except at the peril of his life. Nature is chaste, and it is unto chastity that she gives the Keys of life” (1897, 369).
materialistic approach of modern scientific researchers. When these scientists “‘lift the 
veil of Isis’—for Isis is but the symbol of nature…they see only her physical forms. The 
soul within escapes their view; and the Divine Mother has no answer for them.”
Blavatsky also declared that the true secret of Isis deals with human nature: “what is man, 
his origin, his powers and his destiny.”

Blavatsky directed the Enlightenment narrative of Nature as goddess into a 
scientific-mystical proof that connected mesmerism and magnetism with the seemingly 
miraculous feats of saints and prodigies. The original aim of the Theosophical Society 
was stated grandly in 1875 as: “to collect and diffuse knowledge of the laws which 
govern the universe.” But in spite of its lip-service to science, her Isis cannot be seen as 
scientific in any inductive sense, given its teleological prediction that science is destined 
to uncover the secrets of the past, which are already known to adepts. She eagerly 
anticipated this discovery as a future “overthrow of error and the triumph of Truth.”
By presenting adepts of the past as omniscient, she promoted a circular and closed version of 
truth, rather than the open-ended inquiry of nature envisaged by modern science. Egil 
Asprem points out the “dangers” of what he calls Blavatsky’s “open-ended naturalism,” 
in that it fails to allow for either falsification or scientific change.

Nevertheless, Isis is more than a pastiche of superstitions and pseudoscience. In 
spite of its infuriating tedium and laughable and sweeping claims, it makes genuinely 
new and creative arguments. Before delving in more detail into the specific work, it is

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28 1960 (1877), 1:16.  
31 1960 (1877), 1:viii.  
32 See Asprem 2014, 446.
worth while to briefly examine the circumstances of its composition and what they reveal about its originality.

**The Composition of Isis**

Written over a two-year period, *Isis* was composed primarily by Blavatsky—sometimes, apparently, in a trance state. She wrote in English, and had never previously attempted to write a book; her published work was limited to a few articles. Olcott provided significant editorial assistance, compiling and editing the work, dividing it into volumes and chapters, and even writing some portions. Blavatsky claimed the source of her inspiration was “certain men,” and the “sages of the Orient.” Olcott described her process of composition—her handwriting was altered, and she exhibited signs of automatic writing, or copying from “something held invisible in the air before her.” Blavatsky stated that “somebody who knows all dictates to me.” She was not unconscious, but claimed to be writing from “manuscripts, and even printed matter that pass before my eyes.”

Whether she was copying in earnest or was able to access the quoted and plagiarized material through a photographic memory or telepathic ability is unknown. However, the work does display many of the signs of channeled work, as indicated in the following preliminary typology. According to my own research, common characteristics of channeled work include: rapid composition, often disjointed, voluminous, repetitive, and unplanned. It may be accompanied by a visual or auditory component. Although the

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33 1960 (1877), 1:vi.
34 Campbell 1980, 33.
author will sometimes claim not to be aware of what is being written, the material often provides a feeling of liberation for the author, possibly because it frequently connects across conceptual domains and provides fresh insights. The channeled material may require revision after the initial composition. Channeled work acquires authority by engaging social context, and successful work provides satisfying answers to important questions.\textsuperscript{35}

Blavatsky’s work displays many of these characteristics. Even after the division of the work into chapters and volumes by Olcott, it is rambling and difficult to follow. Arguments once made are often repeated with the substitution of new examples and different rhetorical flourishes but with little organized argumentation or progression of themes. Campbell speculates that the difficulties are due to Blavatsky’s inexperience as a writer. “Madame Blavatsky was a person who had an original set of insights but who lacked the literary skills and knowledge of English sufficient to create a work on her own. Relying on written sources and help from friends, she formulated a unique and powerful expression of occult ideas.”\textsuperscript{36}

Whatever the facts of its composition, \textit{Isis} is often given a lesser place in Blavatsky’s work, since it was superseded by \textit{The Secret Doctrine} in the following decade. However, \textit{Isis} contains nearly all of the themes that were later elaborated in \textit{The Secret Doctrine}, though it is less authoritative. It is written more as an essay and less as scripture. It represents Blavatsky struggling to find appropriate arguments to demonstrate her major goals. This more relaxed tone may explain why \textit{Isis} received a better reception from intellectuals of her day than did the later and more dogmatic \textit{Secret Doctrine}.

\textsuperscript{35} Prophet 2017.  
\textsuperscript{36} Campbell 1980, 35.
In the introduction to *Isis*, she stated that the goals of the Theosophical Society are to “experiment practically in the occult powers of Nature, and to collect and disseminate among Christians information about the Oriental religious philosophies.” These goals were modified and expanded in subsequent years. But taking these goals as a starting point shows that at this early date, Blavatsky was focused on the narrative of miraculous human powers as evidence of hidden natural laws. The two volumes of *Isis* include a compendium of strange occurrences ranging from the Siberian steppes to the jungles of India and the drawing rooms of England. At the end of the work, she reiterated her goals with ten “principles of natural law,” of which the first is: “There is no miracle. Everything that happens is the result of law—eternal, immutable, ever active.”

Stepping out of her own narrative and into a rhetorical and contextual analysis of her arguments, I suggest that her primary goal was to provide a new view of salvation in light of science and materialist claims, and to do this she felt it was necessary to do the following:

1) Challenge materialist conceptions of nature and produce an alternative to Darwinian natural selection that yet incorporated a scientific narrative.
2) Provide an intellectual and philosophical alternative to spiritualism that took into account spiritualist phenomena.
3) Promote Western esotericism as the logical alternative to dogmatic Christianity.
4) Support various Hermetic and Kabbalistic creation accounts.
5) Demonstrate a hidden harmony between Eastern and Western religion as proof of “ancient wisdom.”
6) Promote a view of salvation as the progressive etherealization of the human form.
7) Define evolution as salvation and the development of mesmeric talents as a component of that salvation.

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37 1960 (1877), 1:xli.
38 1960 (1877), 2:587.
Her theory of “double evolution” accomplishes several of these goals. It will become apparent by the end of this chapter that the tensions between these conflicting and often competing goals led to the emergence of a new set of priorities, which form the backbone of her later system of human prehistory and destiny. In the remainder of this chapter, I will show how Blavatsky addressed and attempted to prove these goals, and in the process developed new priorities.

Answering Darwin and Materialist Views of Nature: Inventing Soul Evolution

Blavatsky’s critique of Darwin and evolutionary science is intimately bound up with the debates over materialism that, as we have seen, were common in Victorian religious and scientific discourse. Blavatsky’s opponents in this narrative were not Darwin but Tyndall, with his preemptive materialism, and Huxley, with his life-as-protoplasm. Like many religious Victorians, Blavatsky accepted Darwin but was more comfortable with Wallace who, as would be expected, became her patron saint and contributed crucially to her theory of double evolution.

Throughout Isis, she constantly reserved her sharpest barbs for Tyndall and Huxley, particularly their attempts to extend the evolutionary hypothesis back to the earliest beginnings of life and to banish spiritual explanations from science. She described Tyndall as a “Janus-god,” and wrote sarcastically of approaching the temple of materialism and the “blazing sun of the Huxleyocentric system.”

How fallible is modern science as to every fact in nature which can be tested neither by retort nor

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40 1960 (1877), 1:417.
crucible,” she complained.41

Like many of her day, she used electricity and magnetism as analogs for the mysterious forces of nature. Since the effects of these invisible forces were only beginning to be understood by science, she asked how science could presume to explain all forces at play when it had not yet fully investigated mesmeric and spiritualist phenomena? She critiqued Huxley for elevating some facts over others and ignoring the “cumulative testimony of millions of people [i.e., the spiritualists] as to the occurrence of phenomena.”42 She critiqued Tyndall for giving up too easily when he declared that there was an unbridgeable gulf between molecular action and thought. And she pointed out that science might reject “many a thing to-day which she may find herself forced to accept tomorrow”—for example, Franklin’s electricity.43

Identifying as her targets Huxley and Tyndall along with August Comte, founder of positivism, and the physicist Michael Faraday (1791-1867), who had come out in opposition to spiritualism, Blavatsky remarked, “[s]tubborn materialism is often more stupidly bigoted than religious fanaticism itself.”44 She went on to observe, “Tyndall admits that the evolution-hypothesis does not solve, does not profess to solve, the ultimate mystery.”45 She summarized Huxley’s claim in The Physical Basis of Life that “spirit does not exist; thought is a property of matter,” and complained that “the thread of his [Huxley’s] logic begins nowhere, and ends in a void.”46

On the next page, she made what would have been a common vitalist objection to

41 1960 (1877), 1:337.
42 1960 (1877), 1:421.
43 1960 (1877), 1:149.
44 1960 (1877), 1:86.
45 1960 (1877), 1:419.
46 1960 (1877), 1:419.
materialist claims: “What gave the first impulse to those molecules and endowed them with that mysterious faculty of life? What is this occult property which causes the protoplasms of man, beast, reptile, fish, or plant, to differentiate, each ever evolving its own kind and never any other?” Although demonstrating her weak understanding of natural selection, this objection led her to raise a common vitalist theme—what differentiates dead “mutton,” one of Huxley’s examples, from a live lobster?

Her proposed alternative to Tyndall and Huxley was a vitalist conception of nature, focused on the will, echoing Wallace here, and also referencing Schopenhauer. She used the term will to explain the feats of Indian fakirs: “The Will creates; for the will in motion is force, and force produces matter.” Elsewhere, she elaborated:

Call the phenomena force, energy, electricity or magnetism, will, or spirit-power, it will ever be the partial manifestation of the soul, whether disembodied or imprisoned for a while in its body—of a portion of that intelligent, omnipotent, and individual will, pervading all nature and known, through the insufficiency of human language to express correctly psychological images, as—GOD.

Above Huxley and Tyndall she elevated the (then anonymous) authors of Unseen Universe (the Scottish physicists Stewart and Tait), who had, she wrote, “scientifically demonstrated the possibility of certain alleged psychological phenomena through the medium of the universal ether.” She developed her own poetic elaboration on how such

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47 1960 (1877), 1:420.
48 1960 (1877), 1:140.
49 1960 (1877), 1:58.
50 1960 (1877), 1:195.
a process might work, alluding to Chambers’s primordial “fire-mist” as well:

From the boundless expanse of cosmic matter, which had formed itself under
his breath, or will, this cosmic matter—astral light, aether, fire-mist, principle
of life—it matters not how we may call it, this creative principle, or, as our
modern philosophy terms it, law of evolution, by setting in motion the
potencies latent in it, formed suns and stars, and satellites; controlled their
emplacement by the immutable law of harmony, and peopled them “with
every form and quality of life.”

She was not averse to the notion that life had begun in some kind of primordial soup. She
speculated that “both animal and vegetable life are differently modified electrico-
magnetic phenomena, as yet unknown in their fundamental principles.” As an
alternative to Huxley’s protoplasm, she referred to the ancient myth of Hyle, which she
called “prolific slime,” and built up to a discussion of the Egyptian motif of the
ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its tail, as a symbol of “matter vivified by spirit, and
the two conjointly evolving out of chaos (Force) everything that was to be.”

She also elaborated upon spiritual evolution by analogy with physical evolution,
suggesting the existence of “molecules of spirit,” and arguing that if science could not
explain what “draws into concrete masses the material particles which form the smallest
pebble on the ocean-beach, how can they define the limits at which the possible stops and
the impossible begins?” She continued:

51 1960 (1877), 1:146.
52 1960 (1877), 1:137.
53 1960 (1877), 1:146, 149.
Why should there be an attraction between the molecules of matter, and none between those of spirit? If, out of the material portion of the ether, by virtue of the inherent restlessness of its particles, the forms of worlds and their species of plants and animals can be evolved, why, out of the spiritual part of the ether, should not successive races of beings, from the stage of monad to that of man, be developed; each lower form unfolding a higher one until the work of evolution is completed on our earth, in the production of immortal man?\(^\text{54}\)

It is not clear where she thought the molecules of matter became molecules of spirit, and her distinction between spirit and matter is not consistent throughout her body of work. Nevertheless, she did have a point when criticizing Huxley’s insistence on a physical basis for life, which she called a closed box. She described him as guilty of “shutting in, in the molecular cell of the protoplasm, the life-principle,” and complained that, “by shutting out from it the divine influx which comes with subsequent evolution, he closes every door against every possible escape.”\(^\text{55}\) Her impassioned defense of vitalist principles probably helps explain her appeal during the late nineteenth-century reaction to materialism.

Darwin, unlike Huxley, did not come in for the same opprobrium she directed against Tyndall and Huxley. She could find room in his work for a doorway into spiritual ideas:

\(^{54}\) 1960 (1877), 1:340.

\(^{55}\) 1960 (1877), 1:15.
There may be more truth in the adventurous pangensis of Darwin—whom Tyndall calls a “soaring speculator”—than in the cautious, line-bound hypothesis of the latter. If we accept Darwin’s theory of the development of species, we find that his starting-point is placed in front of an open door. We are at liberty with him, to either remain within, or cross the threshold, beyond which lies the limitless and the incomprehensible, or rather the *Unutterable*.  

*Darwin as Proof-Text and Foil*

*Isis* shows Blavatsky attempting, not always successfully, to find a theory that accepts the scientific reality of evolution by natural selection (which she probably did not fully comprehend) but also allows for the separate “evolution” of soul. She accepted early-on that the human physical form is a “product of evolution,” but began to develop her notion of a “double evolution” of soul and body. Some have argued, such as Peter Washington, that Blavatsky was diametrically opposed to Darwin and science just like Christian defenders of the faith. Blavatsky kept a stuffed baboon in her New York study, dressed and wearing spectacles, which she named Professor Fiske after a well-known promoter of Darwinism.

The presence of the baboon signaled, according to Washington, “her own posture in this debate as an adamant anti-Darwinian…. The baboon obviously stands for the Folly of Science as opposed to the Wisdom of Religion…for Darwin versus Blavatsky” and thereby indicated, Washington surmises, “that anyone who thinks as Darwin does must

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57 1960 (1877) 1:9.
be no better than a baboon, i.e. crude and crafty, foolish, vulgar, greedy, gross and deceitful. Yet these were just the charges already being brought against Blavatsky herself.”

Washington continues in this vein, without, however, engaging Blavatsky’s attitudes towards the philosophy of professor John Fiske (1842-1901), a popular author, historian, Harvard professor, and correspondent of Herbert Spencer. Fiske was no materialist, and Blavatsky quoted approvingly from his writings on the question of the relationship between matter and energy. In addition, she presented her work always as being compatible with biological evolution, of which more soon enough. I suggest that, far from being the insult imagined by Washington, Blavatsky named her baboon after Fiske as a sort of joke, and a reference to the way he had been lampooned in the popular press for his support of evolution.

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58 1993, 45.
59 It is either disingenuous or sloppy of Washington to present Fiske as a stalwart promoter of materialism and hence a stand-in for twentieth-century neo-Darwinism. In fact Fiske, who in the 1860s became one of the earliest advocates of Spencerian and Darwinian evolution in the United States (see Clark 1917, 1:308–9), which made him a lightning rod for theological critiques of evolution, nevertheless supported a basic harmony of religion and science along the lines of Anglican natural theology. Blavatsky quoted an 1875 essay of Fiske’s approvingly in Isis where she wrote, in a discussion of mediumistic phenomena, “The inconsistency of the logic of our learned gentlemen against the philosophy of spiritualism proper is admirably pointed out by Professor John Fisk—[sic]—one of their own body. In a recent philosophical work, The Unseen World, while showing that from the very definition of the terms, matter and spirit, the existence of spirit cannot be demonstrated to the senses, and thus no theory is amenable to scientific tests, he deals a severe blow at his colleagues in the following lines: “the belief in the future life is without scientific support, but at the same time it is placed beyond the need of scientific support and the range of scientific criticism.”” Fiske went on to suggest that scientists should “refrain from speculations” about the realm of spirit in order to get along with the religious (quoted in Blavatsky 1960 (1877), 1:42). While Fiske had begun to question theological dogmas early in his academic career (see Clark 1917, 1:109), and was deeply influenced by biblical criticism and Eastern religion, Fiske’s major work, Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy, promotes a kind of natural theology that sought to incorporate both Darwin and Spencer, but also to differentiate Spencer from the positivism of August Comte (see Clark 1917, 2:30). Fiske tried to reconcile science and religion by presenting a progressive human evolutionary destiny. Sounding like Wallace, he concluded, as summarized by his biographer John Clark, that “upon no imaginable hypothesis of Evolution could mind be regarded as a product of matter, and that the existence of psychical energy distinct from physical energy implies as its antecedent source something quasi-psychical.” As Fiske put it, mind is “a form of Being which can neither be assimilated to humanity, nor to any lower type of existence….but….higher than humanity” (Clark 1917, 2:38).
60 An 1874 cartoon from the American newspaper the Daily Graphic portrays Fiske floating a kite labelled
Contra Washington, I argue that her true position on Darwin, evolution, and even Fiske, was more nuanced. Blavatsky was fascinated with fossils, particularly those of extinct creatures, and according to her sister Vera, used to collect petrified fossils and compose “marvelous and sensational stories…of their past fights and battles.” She was interested in finding a way to account for these fossils, which Genesis clearly did not, as well as the long time frames that geological science had demonstrated, while also accounting for mediumistic phenomena, which she saw as also subject to scientific laws. She was a fan of Éliphas Lévi (of whom more shortly), who had already stated that “Darwin’s theory does not contradict the Bible…the great week of the creation is a series of Geological epochs.” She was already and always looking for a way to accommodate Darwin into an esoteric system, just as many clergy of her day were trying to incorporate him into a religious system.

Although Blavatsky engaged directly with Darwin, she did so as part of her larger project to demonstrate a basic harmony between esotericism and science. The “law of the double evolution, physically and spiritually” is, Blavatsky argued, compatible with Darwinian theory. “This belief, instead of clashing with the doctrine of evolution and gradual development held by eminent men of our day, simplifies and completes it, on the contrary. It can readily dispense with special creation for each species.” In her discussion of instinct on the same page, however, Blavatsky revealed that she had not really come to terms with Darwin’s theory on the slow development of instinct and

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“The Doctrine of Evolution” while primates read Spencer and Darwin at his feet, linked in a chain with more primitive species such as reptiles and frogs.
63 1960 (1877), 1:425.
reason.

However, she seized upon and repeatedly mentioned Darwin’s proposal that all animals had descended from “at most at most only four or five progenitors”—at times she exhibited agreement and at times skepticism. The notion of four or five progenitors suggested a harmony with the esoteric principles she wanted to support, including her developing idea that “successive races” of humans had evolved from earlier and more advanced beings. Darwin had gotten much right, she asserted, but what he had gotten wrong was to focus on progress in only one direction, from simple to complex life, ignoring the prior connection of humans with higher spiritual spheres. “Darwin begins his evolution of species at the lowest point and traces upward. His only mistake may be that he applies his system at the wrong end,” she wrote. One can see her attempting an awkward marriage of the prickly and branching Darwinian tree with the smoothly descending ladder of being. She wrote:

Certain ancient and mediaeval occultists…antedated Darwin, embraced more or less all his theories on natural selection and the evolution of species, and largely extended the chain at both ends…. Moreover, these philosophers were explorers as daring in psychology as in physiology and anthropology. They never turned aside from the double parallel-path traced for them by their great master Hermes. ‘As above, so below,’ was ever their axiom; and their physical evolution was traced out simultaneously with the spiritual one.

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64 2006 (1859), 756.
66 1960 (1877), 1:429.
67 1960 (1877), 1:427.
Her tolerance for Darwin went only so far, and she tended to lash out in a
haphazard and polemical manner at those of his premises which she found inconvenient.
Darwin had expressed the hope, towards the end of *Origin of Species*, that in the future
his theories would put psychology on a new footing, “that of the necessary acquirement
of each mental power and capacity by gradation.”68 She attacked this premise, arguing
that it would be acceptable to “no one but a stone-blind materialist, one utterly devoid of
intuitiveness.” Mental powers, she asserted, were a part of “man’s psychical and spiritual
evolution.”69 This, of course, was a topic of hot debate at the time, in which Wallace had
already strenuously engaged. It is important, therefore, to consider Wallace’s influence
on Blavatsky’s double evolution.

*Wallace as Patron Saint of Double Evolution*

The “door” that Blavatsky found closed by Huxley and Tyndall but open in Darwin is
one that Wallace had already walked through, and Blavatsky developed language that
reflects Wallace’s 1864 proposal that a separate mental evolution had begun once the
physical human form had been developed, with its unexplained excess brain capacity.
Wallace, like Blavatsky, had also questioned Huxley’s protoplasm, asking how a
“combination of a thousand material elements in a molecule” could, by “the mere
addition of one, two, or a thousand other material elements…in any way tend to produce
a self-conscious existence.” Further, he argued, material elements and consciousness are
“radically distinct,” and “[t]o say that mind is a product or function of protoplasm, or of
its molecular changes, is to use words to which we can attach no clear conception. You

68 2006 (1859), 759.
69 1960 (1877), 1:153.
cannot have, in the whole, what does not exist in any of the parts.”

Wallace had, from his earliest interest in what would become the theory of natural selection, wanted to include a study of cultural factors in the evolution of societies. He was, as mentioned, one of the first to suggest that “mind” exempted humans from natural selection. Smith proposes that Wallace’s argument “that humankind rises above biologically material controls” was in the process of development even in his 1858 work credited with the discovery of natural selection, and that his interest in mind did not develop suddenly and solely out of his interest in spiritualism. Others argue that he changed his views in response to spiritualism. Wallace, a self-described “materialist” and “philosophical sceptic” prior to his association with spiritualism, stated that his acceptance that “preterhuman intelligences of various grades…can and do act on matter” was “in no way inconsistent with a thorough acceptance of the grand doctrine of Evolution, through Natural Selection.”

Wallace did, however, expand his views after his exposure to spiritualist phenomena, as well as a lecture he attended in 1865 by the well-known medium and trance lecturer Emma Hardinge (later Britten), a “pivotal influence” which “has not been previously appreciated,” Smith argues. In the 1860s, Hardinge was making arguments in favor of treating spiritualist phenomena as a science (a form of “chemistry of the spirit”) that were similar to those Blavatsky would later develop. She likely influenced Wallace’s statement that miracles are a natural process, which he made in his 1866 essay

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71 2008, 393.
72 See Benton 2008.
74 C. Smith 2008, 404.
“The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural.” In order to better understand the development of Wallace’s ideas, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the evolutionary ideas of Hardinge Britten, who was herself influenced by Chambers.

Born in Great Britain, Hardinge Britten (1823-1899) was a popular trance lecturer on both sides of the Atlantic, and had devoted considerable time and skill to establishing spiritualism as a religious faith. As Joscelyn Godwin describes it, “In Emma’s synthesis, spiritualism becomes a complete religion, with a cosmology and an eschatology, a version of world history able to explain all myths and religions, a devotional practice in the form of a sort of unitarian prayer, and a social or socialist program for this world.”

Five years before the lecture attended by Wallace, Hardinge had given a series of trance lectures in Chicago, which presented her developing evolutionary theories. Her lecture “Spirit—Its Origin and Destiny” plays on themes which would later also be taken up by Blavatsky. She set forth a form of vitalism informed by Chambers, tracing life from dead rocks to “creeping things,” describing a moment when the “viewless ministers” at work on creation (a possible reference to the esoteric creator demigods of Hermetic lore) had “impressed the thoughts” of God upon matter, at which time animals developed the capacity to govern “their motion by their own will,” which represented the emergence of “the fragments of a spiritual existence.”

She differentiated animals from men by identifying “spirituality” as a quality unique to man. Animals possessed life and intellect and even elements of “spirituality”—as dogs would “worship” their masters—but life was not spirit. It was

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77 Hardinge 1860, 80–81.
78 Hardinge 1860, 87.
only in man that “as the Almighty Author has prepared the form, the elements of matter, carefully, until at last they were complete…so in all the fragments of thought that are manifested in the different forms of animal life, he has everywhere prepared the elements of spirit.” This notion of the “preparation” of a material form which then becomes a vehicle for spirit was an essential element in Blavatsky’s conceptual blending.

Hardinge identified in humans a quality that she called “mind,” an aggregation of intellectual and spiritual qualities that she defined vaguely and attempted to distinguish from animal qualities, which existed only as rudiments. Wallace seemed to echo her narrative in his speech proposing the quality of “mind” before the Anthropological Society of London in 1864, in which he described a “law of physical change” that affected animals until “at length…there came into existence a being in whom that subtle force we term mind, became of greater importance than his mere bodily structure.” Mind gave man clothing, cultivation of food, etc. Man is thus “a being apart, since he is not influenced by the great laws which irresistibly modify all other organic beings,” Wallace said.

Wallace’s argument that natural selection ended when mind began seems to follow Hardinge’s assertion that “form ends” with the development of man: “Whatever nature has been aiming at, all she has struggled for, all that for millions of years she has experimented with, in the laboratory of matter and form, she has at last completed in the magnificent structure of man. Here form ends.” Unlike Chambers, who had speculated that man might be destined to transform into higher forms, Hardinge declared that there

79 Hardinge 1860, 89.
82 Hardinge 1860, 84.
was not to be a “higher form than man,” and that “man is the last of form,” with his purpose “to give birth to spirit,” whose destiny is “eternal progress.”

But transformation after death was not the sole aim of Hardinge’s theology. Like Andrew Jackson Davis, whom she sometimes paralleled, she promoted charitable causes, and saw the importance of culture in the transformation of humanity. She stated that the “immortal spirit” is “worthy of all the culture thou canst give it here,” as demonstrated by “the various sciences and discoveries of modern times.” She described man as a semi-divine being in a Hermetic sense, whose mastery of the natural world proved his status—his ability to scale mountains and build railways, his mastery of electricity (as “lord of the lightning”) and tamer of natural forces (as “king of the water”) showed that “thus can man knit up all the fragments of thought that God has prepared, and stand a demi-god, with all the forms of earth committed to his vice-regal charge.”

She used language reminiscent of Renaissance humanism, describing man as one whose “free spirit” would “mock” the hangman “with its unquenchable life—life eternal.” But her “life eternal” sounds more physical than Christian salvation. Spirit, she concluded, is the “divine spark, sown in the soil of matter.” Man is destined to manifest, through the “arts and sciences…more and more of the attributes of the divine nature.”

Although we do not know exactly which of Hardinge’s works had the most influence on Wallace, he did quote from her Chicago addresses. After his first encounter with Hardinge, Wallace published his pamphlet “The Scientific Aspect of the

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83 Hardinge 1860, 95, 97.  
84 Hardinge 1860, 98.  
85 Hardinge 1860, 90.  
86 Hardinge 1860, 91.  
87 Hardinge 1860, 91–92.
Supernatural,” which also cited her as a source. During the 1860s, he continued his interest in spiritualism. Between 1866 and 1867, he held seances at his home (in an environment which he could control, unlike the parlors of dubious mediums). These controlled events convinced him of the reality of spiritualist phenomena. As Smith puts it, the phenomena manifest in his home turned him from a promoter of spiritualism into a believer.88 Wallace’s first public elaboration of his views on the limits of natural selection came in his review of Lyell’s updated edition of *Principles of Geology* in 1869.

Wallace’s early depictions of mental evolution relied upon a deist law-based narrative that sounds similar to Hardinge’s. Both systems would today be called intelligent design, but both Wallace and Hardinge distinguished their approach from biblical creationism. As Smith describes it, Wallace never abandoned his commitment to naturalistic explanations of human evolution, arguing against the idea that a creator had fashioned creation, and reminding his readers in much the same way that Richard Dawkins might today, that “adaptation” tends to take on the “appearance of design.”89

Smith calls Wallace’s system “a kind of ‘design’…that looks not to an anthropomorphic God, but instead to laws-based final causes.”90 As pointed out by Steven Dick, Wallace explicitly ruled out a hypothesis of “first causes,” not claiming to have insight into creation. As Wallace framed his theory, “the development of the essentially human portions of man’s structure and intellect may have been determined by the directing influence of some higher intelligent beings, acting through natural and universal laws.”91

90 2008, 409.
91 Wallace *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection* 1870, cited in Dick 2008, 337. Dick argues that
For Wallace, evolution was always tied up with social progress towards an unknown goal, a weak form of teleology. He speculated, in 1869, that a “higher state of perfection” may exist, “which we may never reach,” an “ideally perfect social state” in which law and punishment would be obsolete because everyone would be so well trained in “the sympathetic feelings and moral faculties of our nature” that moral law would naturally be obeyed. Wallace was much more focused on the material world than was Blavatsky, and it was probably Myers, with whom Wallace was associated, who would have found these ideas useful.

Nevertheless, for Blavatsky, Wallace was greatly to be preferred over Darwin, and his thought can be clearly seen in some aspects of her double evolution. In 1874, the *Fortnightly Review* published a two-part essay by Wallace on spiritualism entitled “A defence of modern spiritualism,” which incorporates the term *evolution* in a mental (and by implication spiritual) sense. Wallace here gave himself free rein to develop a more complete system than he had when he first proposed evolution of mind back in the 1860s. Here he connects the mental and physical skills gained by humans on earth with the nature of their individual afterlife. He also went further and codified his definition of evolution into a sort of spiritualist’s creed:

1. Man is a duality, consisting of an organized spiritual form, evolved coincidently with and permeating the physical body, and having corresponding organs and development. (2) Death is the separation of this

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this does not necessarily imply Wallace’s belief in God, which can be separated from belief in “superior intelligence.” Writes Dick, “Intelligent design must also be starkly distinguished from the idea of late-twentieth-century creationism (today called ‘scientific creationism’), which implies that the world was created in less than ten thousand years….With his vast knowledge of biology and geology…Wallace knew better than that” (Dick 2008, 338).
duality, and effects no change in the spirit, morally or intellectually. (3)

*Progressive evolution* of the intellectual and moral nature is the destiny of individuals; the knowledge, attainments, and experience of earth-life forming the basis of spirit-life.  

This definition, while not directly quoted by Blavatsky, was most likely seen by her in the *Fortnightly Review* or one of the many subsequent reprints, and provides an intellectual framework for writing and thinking about a parallel mental or spiritual and physical evolution. Wallace, therefore, provided one of the crucial conceptual building blocks in Blavatsky’s system. Blavatsky’s formal definition of evolution in the introduction to *Isis* referred to a “higher or spiritual evolution” in a way that would find support in Wallace, although she was much more definite about describing the source of the higher intelligences involved in human evolution:

**EVOLUTION. — The development of higher orders of animals from the lower.**

Modern, or so-called *exact* science, holds but to a one-sided physical evolution, prudently avoiding and ignoring the higher or spiritual evolution, which would force our contemporaries to confess the superiority of the

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92 Wallace 1874, 801, emphasis added.
93 Additionally, an 1871 description of evolution by Gerald Massey, a British spiritualist and mythographer, may demonstrate another bridge between Wallace and Blavatsky. Massey wrote, “I for one accept the truth of Mr. Darwin’s theory of man’s origin and believe that we have ascended physically from those lower forms of creation which we find lying around us like chips in the great workshop of Nature…But the theory contains only one-half the explanation of man’s origins, and needs Spiritualism to carry it through and complete it. For while this ascent on the physical side has been progressing through myriads of ages, the Divine descent has also been going on—man being spiritually an incarnation from the Divine as well as a human development from the animal creation. The cause of the development is spiritual. Mr. Darwin’s theory does not in the least militate against ours—we think it necessitates it; he simply does not deal with our side of the subject” (cited in Lavoie 2012, 146). From Gerald Massey and Wallace, it is but a small conceptual step to Blavatsky’s “double evolution.”
ancient philosophers and psychologists over themselves. The ancient
sages…made their starting point from the first manifestation of the unseen….

Evolution began with them from pure spirit, which descending lower and
lower down, assumed at last a visible and comprehensible form, and became
matter. Arrived at this point, they speculated in the Darwinian method, but on
a far more large and comprehensive basis.\textsuperscript{94}

In the body of the work, Blavatsky more forcefully laid out the case for “double
evolution—spiritual and physical.”\textsuperscript{95}

Blavatsky admired Wallace, though he probably did not return the favor. They
exchanged a brief correspondence in which Blavatsky presented him with a copy of \textit{Isis}
and in reply, he wrote, thanking her and remarking, “I have as yet only had time to read a
chapter here and there. I am amazed at the vast amount of erudition displayed in them
and the great interest of the topics on which they treat…. Your book will open up to
many spiritualists a whole world of new ideas, and cannot fail to be of the greatest value
in the enquiry which is now being so earnestly carried on.”\textsuperscript{96} Blavatsky made the same
distinction as did Wallace between the evolution of the physical form and the “evolution”
of mind or spirit, though her description of the spiritual anatomy diverges importantly

\textsuperscript{94} 1960 (1877), 1:xxx–xxxii.
\textsuperscript{95} 1960 (1877), 1:9.
\textsuperscript{96} Cited in Cranston 1993, 160, quoting a reprint from \textit{The Theosophist}, April 1906, 559. Wallace never
endorsed Theosophy, and openly challenged Blavatsky’s ideas about reincarnation, after he had a chance to
be exposed to them: “the theosophical doctrine of the re-incarnation….So far as I can learn, it is a pure
speculation, and can appeal to no direct evidence in its support” (cited in Lavoie 2012, 329). Lavoie states
that Wallace was “used as a pawn by Blavatsky” (2012, 315). However, there were clear similarities in
their views of spiritual evolution and the progress of the soul after death. It is likely that Wallace’s initial
letter to Blavatsky stemmed from recognition of the parallel aims of philosophical spiritualism and
Theosophy. Once he had better understood Theosophical doctrines, he pointedly declined to endorse them
but Blavatsky continued to quote him in support of her theories.
from Hardinge Britten’s and Wallace’s. To search out the source of these differences, we must now turn to Blavatsky’s anti-spiritualism.

Providing an Intellectual and Philosophical Alternative to Spiritualism

As of the mid-1870s when Olcott and Blavatsky met, both were uncomfortable with the increasingly tawdry atmosphere that surrounded the spiritualist movement, and set out to establish an alternative which would focus on philosophical and “scientific” principles yet would also preserve many of the tenets of spiritualism in its “higher” forms, for example as expressed by Jackson Davis or Hardinge Britten. In Isis, Blavatsky lamented the “huckstering about of pompous names attached to idiotic communications.”

97 Her narrative around spiritualism became the foundation of her anthropology (description of human spiritual and physical nature), as well as her later development of a system of morality which, though it claimed a rejection of religious principles, closely mirrored that of the religions she was delegitimizing. It also formed the basis of arguments about latent human talents that would resonate with psychical researchers.

Although she had participated in seances and even acted as a medium herself, by the mid-1870s, Blavatsky felt there was something wrong with spiritualism. Both she and Olcott sought to distance themselves from table rappings and unseen harps. But she displayed and used phenomena to convince Olcott and other early followers of the reality of her work and insights—and that such phenomena were law-based and not caused by spirits of the dead. She used automatic writing to produce letters to Olcott addressed to him from unseen masters. And he received visionary visits from these beings, one of

97 1960 (1877), 1:41.
whom he claimed had left behind a physical turban, an object that is preserved to this day. At the time, these teachers with whom Blavatsky and Olcott believed themselves to be connected were said to be alive on earth, and not disembodied or departed, a distinction that separated Blavatsky from mediums. Olcott wrote of Blavatsky as “one of the most remarkable mediums in the world,” whose “mediumship is totally different from that of any other person I ever met; for, instead of being controlled by spirits to do their will, it is she who seems to control them to do her bidding.”

Blavatsky’s antipathy for spiritualism may have had something to do with her own involvement with what she would later call parlor tricks, the phenomena she claimed to have experienced since childhood, such as the unaccountable movement of furniture in her presence, and later, the restoration of lost or broken objects and the unexplained appearance of flowers and notes. She claimed these were the demonstration of natural laws, and much of her writing in Isis would attempt to demonstrate the “scientific” principles behind such phenomena.

The historian Janet Oppenheim describes the climate in which Blavatsky was writing. “[R]elationships, on all sides, were complex and shifting.” It was a time when spiritualists were attempting to define themselves as promoting rational inquiry in opposition to mysticism but, faced with the limits of physical science, ended up adopting “an essentially occult view of the universe, and animistic vision of closely interconnected parts.” The Theosophical Society attracted members from among spiritualists, especially in its early days, and bitter battles eventually erupted with prominent

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98 Olcott 1875, People From the Other World, cited in Cranston 1993, 126.
99 1985, 159.
100 1985, 160.
spiritualist figures over Blavatsky’s theology and her attempted delegitimization of spirit communications. Yet, as noted, there were shared aims among the groups, and often overlapping affiliations.

As mentioned, Hardinge Britten (who had married in 1870) was one of the original seventeen individuals present at the founding meeting of the Theosophical Society, and was listed as a Councillor in the group’s original charter. Though Harding Britten later broke with Theosophy, Blavatsky quoted her in *Isis* and clearly wanted her approval.

In *The Theosophical Society: History of a Spiritualist Movement*, Jeffrey Lavoie explores the connections between the Theosophical Society and spiritualism. While his book does not actually argue that the Society was simply or merely a form of spiritualism, he marshals convincing evidence for the complex interconnections and “kinetic social climate” between the two movements. He argues that the “philosophies and belief systems” of the Theosophical Society “remained compatible with Spiritualism” through Blavatsky’s death in 1891. While I think that at least his title overstates the case, his work provides insight into Blavatsky’s theological program.

Several of the arguments of *Isis* parallel those of Hardinge Britten, particularly as presented in her *Art Magic*, which was composed at the same time as *Isis*. According to Marc Demarest, editor of the annotated edition of *Art Magic*, it either “provoked or

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101 2012, 10.
102 2012, 5.
103 Lavoie notes that Blavatsky adapted her message for her audience and could make it appear more or less spiritualist, which continued even after her journey to India: “Blavatsky continuously shifts between a harmonization with Spiritualism to a demarcation away from this movement throughout her writings which she changes based on her mood and her audience….Whether or not finances and power were ultimate goal; nonetheless, this shifting remained apparent in many of her writings” (2012, 42).
informed” *Isis*. I will take a few moments here to discuss *Art Magic* for its insight into Blavatsky’s work. While it purports to be a practical manual of the art of magic, it is primarily a philosophical text, was allegedly written by a “European gentleman.”

However, Demarest (and most others) now believe it was composed by Hardinge Britten herself, hiding behind an anonymous author in order to protect her livelihood as a Spiritualist speaker.105

*Art Magic* was published in late April 1876, had been advertised in 1875, and was probably composed just before or at the same time as *Isis*, which existed in manuscript form possibly by November 1875 and was complete in October 1876, though not published until 1877.106 Demarest believes that Hardinge Britten drew on Blavatsky’s knowledge of the occult and that the two books are certainly related in that they “share a unique set of references, and a group of statistically improbable phrases (SIP) and sources that are found nowhere else.”107 They can be seen in some sense as products of the same school.

Blavatsky and Hardinge Britten differed on the approach to reforming spiritualism, but both tried to do so by legitimating it with reference to esoteric traditions. As Demarest describes it, the author of *Art Magic* sought a “way to save Modern Spiritualism from itself” by “the traduction of the spirit communications at the heart of Modern Spiritualism into an older, occult tradition.”108 In this goal, Hardinge Britten’s association with Blavatsky can be seen as mutually beneficial, since Blavatsky had a

104 2011, iv.
105 See Demarest 2011, xliii-xlvi.
106 According to Demarest, “If I am right in thinking that *Art Magic*’s text was still being composed in early 1876, there is significant overlap in time of composition between the two. And because *Art Magic* was self-published, its publication cycle time was significantly shorter than that of *Isis Unveiled*” (2011, xlii n68).
107 2011, xliii.
108 2011, xiii.
deeper background in these esoteric sources. Hardinge Britten’s central goal was, according to Demarest, to “preserve the central feature of Modern Spiritualism—spirit communion—by transplanting it into the occult tradition, and then rewriting that occult tradition to emphasize its dependence, everywhere and always, on what the author of Art Magic sees as defensible science: magnetism and psychology.\(^{109}\)

Blavatsky performed much the same task, but also attacked spirit communion, making her work the more heretical, from the standpoint of the spiritualist movement. Olcott claimed that Blavatsky had inspired parts of Art Magic, and that Hardinge Britten had stolen unpublished portions of Isis, which then had to be rewritten. Demarest agrees that there is probably some truth to this allegation, and that Olcott and Blavatsky assisted and shaped Hardinge Britten’s project.

Like Isis, Art Magic copies shamelessly from esoteric texts and the two works rely on many of the same sources. However, unlike Isis, which often footnotes its direct quotations, Art Magic rarely mentions its sources, and includes few footnotes. Demarest has evaluated the text and found that earlier chapters rely less on borrowed (plagiarized) texts than the later ones, which may have been composed in a rush.

The two works share several themes. Both quote from and reference Eastern scripture and reverence both Indian and Egyptian culture, both link Eastern miracle workers with Western mediums in an Orientalist discourse. In addition, Hardinge Britten shares with Blavatsky what Demarest calls “sexual abstinence” and “a deep distrust of the erotic.”\(^{110}\) Finally, both attempt to link science and occult knowledge by focusing on mesmerism, electromagnetism, ether, and evolution. Hardinge Britten and her husband

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\(^{109}\) 2011, xxiv.  
\(^{110}\) 2011, xxii n32.
William Britten had during the early 1870s attempted to make a living practicing “galvanic medicine,” a type of healing using electricity, and both she and Blavatsky incorporate narratives about electricity, magnetism and mental healing into their systems.

Nevertheless, Blavatsky was the more skilled communicator and even though her book appeared a year after *Art Magic*, her appropriation of both scientific and esoteric work is more convincing and led to the greater success of her book. However, the claims that she borrowed from *Art Magic* should not be overlooked. She clearly received some inspiration from its author, but her competing solution to the problems of spiritualism did not play well with Hardinge Britten, who distanced herself from Theosophy not long after the publication of *Isis*.

Blavatsky’s arguments against Christianity in *Isis* echo those of Hardinge Britten, including antipathy for Church Fathers, opposition to Christianity’s claims of monopoly on truth, attempts to wed science and religion, and an evolutionary progress narrative building upon Chambers that took into account the long geological time frames and relatively late appearance of human beings. Blavatsky relied on Hardinge Britten even while chipping away at one of the edifices of spiritualism, the ability of the dead to communicate with the living.

Both Blavatsky and Hardinge Britten drew inspiration from Éliphas Lévi, a penname of the French Catholic and socialist Alphonse Louis Constant (1810-1875). Lévi, who subscribed to vitalist and *panentheist* views of nature (i.e., that all of nature is ensouled), promoted a “science of spirits” as a way to demystify the phenomena of spiritualism. Although Lévi used the term “science” to describe his system, he was far from systematic, and he used mesmeric phenomena to demonstrate the truth of miracles
as based in natural law and nature, while also warning of the dangers of spiritualism and mediumship. Blavatsky adopted some of his arguments and adapted others—she had no interest in aligning herself with the Catholic church as he did. But she ran into similar contradictions when she attempted to use mesmeric phenomena to bolster her anti-materialist stance while also simultaneously undermining spiritualist claims.

The arguments marshalled by Blavatsky against spiritualism were first systematically presented in *Isis* and are reviewed below. Her argument had two components, which were not necessarily in harmony. They are: 1) The physical phenomena of spiritualism such as apports and rappings as well as mental phenomena like thought-reading are not actually caused by departed spirits but are the demonstration of natural laws and talents that can be learned or acquired by anyone to some degree but

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111 Lévi engaged in a polemic against the emerging religion of “spiritism,” charging that it “renders the priesthood useless” and transforms “the severe grandeurs of theology” into “romantic and sentimental trivialities” and that they “arrange eternal dogma as you please…invent fantastic paradises and an endurable perdition” (1897, 376, 378). This critique demanded an answer, and both Blavatsky and Hardinge Britten attempted to provide one. Lévi’s arguments against spiritualism revolve around his Catholic allegiances and his invocation of esoteric doctrine. For example, he questioned the claims of mediums since “we cannot behold the gods without dying” and therefore theurgy takes place only in the imagination (1897, 52–53). He attempted to distinguish between a “true Magic, not that of necromancers and enchanters, but that of the initiated and the Magi” and a “false Magic [that] is a blind force added to the blunders and disorders of folly” (1897, 53). We can see elements of this argument in Blavatsky. Lévi blamed “false miracles” on “astral congestions” (1897, 57) and the apparitions of seances on disengaged astral bodies (1897, 146–49). Yet he also elsewhere suggested that both prophecy and miracles are signs of “human divinity” and addressed the phenomena of the untutored or childlike and uninitiated seer (1897, 241–43). Finally, he suggested that the recurrence of miraculous phenomena throughout history holds the key to human “command” of “Nature” by means of the will and imagination (1897, 375). He was unwilling to either support the claims of spiritualists or to deny that miracles did occasionally happen to the untutored. He marshalled his arguments against spiritualism, stating that spirits that ascend after death cannot descend again, therefore “the souls of the dead are not around us, as the spirit-rappers suppose. Those whom we love may still see and appear to us, but only by mirage and reflection in the common mirror of the light” (1897, 158). The air is filled with “phantoms,” or “larvae,” which “obess” mediums (1897, 163–64). Lévi pointed out the often “obscene” and “ridiculous” nature of automatic writing, which demonstrated that “it would be above all a sovereign absurdity to recognize the intervention of disembodied souls” (1897, 166). Yet he also declared miracles to be universal and law-based. Translator and Theosophist Arthur Edward Waite criticized him as follows: “Éliphas Lévi had few fixed opinions, and yet he never failed to express the impression of the moment, in the terms of an axiom and with an accent of absolute authority” (in Lévi 1897, 505n21). Both Blavatsky and Myers took up the questions raised by Lévi, but reached different conclusions.
are also hereditary. 2) The soul is bi-partite, and mediums contact only the lower soul. The nonsensical quality of many spirit-communications is caused by mediums contacting not the wise spirits with whom they claim to communicate, but the lower elements of departed souls, who may mislead and cause spiritual detriment both to mediums and those who consult them. Only true “mediators” can contact wise spirits. Mediums are of a lower character, and often resort to fraud, while “mediators” can be identified by their high moral character.

Argument 1, which we may call the *phenomena-as-law* argument, supported scientific investigation of these phenomena and dovetailed with the goals of psychical researchers, as discussed in chapter 4. It could also find support among many spiritualists. Argument 2, which may be called the *medium-mediator* argument, had a specific theological aim, which was to distinguish Blavatsky and her teachings from the productions of spiritualists and to discourage communication with the dead. The two arguments clash in several ways, which were only partially resolved through conceptual blending.

Blavatsky developed her *phenomena-as-law* argument roughly as follows. Spiritualist phenomena are not caused by departed spirits but are “some as yet unexplained force in nature” understood by the true “theurgists.”\footnote{1960 (1877), 1:54.} She cited Epicurus to support this contention, “‘The gods exist,’ says Epicurus, ‘but they are not what the rabble (ὁι πολλοί) suppose them to be.’”\footnote{1960 (1877), 1:436.} She went on to call these seemingly divine phenomena demonstrations of natural law, quoting Wallace: “As Mr. Wallace justly observes, Hume’s apothegm, that ‘a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature,’ is
imperfect; for in the first place it assumes that we know all the laws of nature; and, second, that an unusual phenomenon is a miracle.”

In a letter written later, she told how she had originally convinced Olcott of the lack of connection between phenomena and departed spirits by demonstrating her own ability to move objects at a distance through the “organs” of her “astral body.” She reviewed eight theories of spiritualist phenomena identified by the physicist William Crookes, who had recently investigated the well-known medium Daniel Dunglas Home. Blavatsky dismissed most of them, including “unconscious cerebral action” (also commonly called “unconscious cerebration” in the scientific literature of the day) and “the spirit of the medium, perhaps in association with the spirits of some or all of the people present.” Crookes and other scientists needed, she asserted, to “go as deeply into the study of the triple nature of man—physiological, psychological, and divine—as did their predecessors, the magicians, theurgists, and thaumaturgists of old.”

She later explained modern spiritualist phenomena as simply the latest evidence of a cross-cultural human experience. In this she was building upon an existing narrative that connected modern and ancient phenomena. She invoked the famous “daemon” of Socrates, described in the (possibly pseudonymous) Platonic dialogue *Theages*, that refers to a divine inner voice that brings premonitions, and was elaborated upon by Plutarch in the first century. The existence of this daemon, upon which Socrates was said by Plutarch to rely for advice and counsel, was evidence, according to Blavatsky, of the

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114 1960 (1877), 1:421–22. See also Kripal (2017, xxxvii–xli) for a discussion of Hume’s “Of Miracles.”
115 Cranston 1993, 122, citing letter to Franz Hartmann, *The Path*, vol. 10 (March 1896) 368–73.
116 1960 (1877), 1:47.
117 1960 (1877), 1:49.
universality of mesmeric and magnetic phenomena.\(^{118}\)

Blavatsky compared Jesus, Apollonius of Tyana, and the biblical figures Elisha and Moses to modern saints, fakirs, and mediums. She asserted, “We assume the fact to be so well established as to require no labored effort on our part at this time to furnish proof that unconscious manifestations of spirit-power, as well as conscious feats of high magic, have happened in all countries, in all ages, and with hierophants as well as through irresponsible mediums.”\(^{119}\)

Mediumistic talents could be developed as well as inherited and passed down, she explained. “The condition seems hereditable, like any other physical or mental peculiarity; many, and we may even say most great mediums having had mediumship exhibited in some form by one or more progenitors.” On the same page, she commented on connections between mesmerism and other paranormal activity, remarking that mesmeric subjects often become clairvoyant, and speculating that people could be “saturated” by magnetic force and hence become mediums by either “the mesmeric process, by spirit-agency; or by self-will.”\(^{120}\)

She challenged scientists to take up the study of these phenomena, and blamed their reticence on “scientific psychophobia.”\(^{121}\) She did not expect that all of the phenomena would turn out to be genuine, but stated that even “allowing a large discount for clever fraud, what remains is quite serious enough to demand the careful scrutiny of science.”\(^{122}\) Statements like this would have resonated quite well with both spiritualists

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\(^{118}\) 1960 (1877), 1:131. Myers (1889) also explores this possibility.  
\(^{119}\) 1960 (1877), 1:486.  
\(^{120}\) 1960 (1877), 1:500.  
\(^{121}\) 1960 (1877), 1:46.  
\(^{122}\) 1960 (1877), 1:40.
and the scientifically inclined, including those who would later go on to found the Society for Psychical Research.

But here is where her arguments left off the pretense of promoting objective research and entered the world of speculative or constructive theology. In attempting to explain the phenomena, she developed an increasingly elaborate theory of the spirit world. This became a bridge rationale connecting her phenomena-as-law and medium-mediator narratives. Spiritualist phenomena, she declared, could be explained by two things: the action of the irrational soul or astral body, and the action of “elemental forces,” which she defined as “forces of nature” that are intended to operate according to “general law” but also can be manipulated by the departed and used for nefarious ends.\textsuperscript{123} She warned that spiritualists needed to “learn to discriminate between spirits and to guard themselves against the baser sort.”\textsuperscript{124}

Hers was not a traditional demonology. She deplored the Catholic fascination with the Devil and attribution of mediumistic phenomena to evil forces. She proposed that acts commonly attributed to “the Devil” could be explained by the action of disembodied human spirits clustered around the “plastic” human soul.\textsuperscript{125} Mediums, she declared, are those who can be manipulated by these spirits, while mediators can not.

The medium-mediator argument was intimately connected with her model of the human as tripartite (and later consisting of seven parts).\textsuperscript{126} Soul and spirit were not the same thing, she argued, evoking the passionate soul of the \textit{Phaedrus}, as well as the

\textsuperscript{123} 1960 (1877), 1:xxix.
\textsuperscript{124} 1960 (1877), 1:53.
\textsuperscript{125} 1960 (1877), 1: 459–60.
\textsuperscript{126} In \textit{Isis}, prefiguring the seven-part soul which she would later adopt, she also attempted to justify a multi-part soul on the basis of cross-cultural comparisons, arguing that: “All ancient Greeks believed not only a double, but even a triple soul to exist in man,” and declared that Jain and Vedic doctrines concurred 1960 (1877) 1: 429; see also 1960 (1877) 1:12, 37.
Neoplatonic distinction between the lower and higher soul. The argument rests upon her tripartite anthropology and her declaration that “soul” is in reality soul and spirit. The spirit ascends towards a divine union as described in Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and gnostic writings, but the soul decays and may after death linger close to the material world as a disembodied “spirit,” imparting bits of information recollected from its life on earth, but not possessing true wisdom or knowledge. One can see why she wanted to make this distinction, but her description of the lower soul, partially indebted to Lévi, is at odds with earlier philosophical systems.127

According to Blavatsky, these lower souls can make use of the “elementals,” natural forces, which she argued were responsible for many of the spiritualist phenomena. Since mediums were often of what she termed lower character, she declared that they were able to produce only the garbled ramblings of disembodied spirits. In addition, these mediums, she wrote in Isis, may stoop to the level of trickery for financial gain: “We are quite ready to concede to skeptics that one-half, and even more, of seeming phenomena, are but more or less clever fraud.”128 Mediums exercise their gifts for money, mediators do not.

She also warned that the practice of mediumship itself could be detrimental, and that by contacting these astral shells, mediums ran the risk of becoming ill through losing their vitality. She noted that mediums tend to be of “weak and nervous nature,” “sickly,”

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127 See 1960 (1877), 1:180–81. She called the “irrational soul” the astral body (1960 [1877], 1:181), which would become important in later Theosophy, but would not represent the starry world of the sphere outside the planets to which Neoplatonic use of “astral” had originally referred, or the Paracelsan vehicle of the soul or sphere of will, but a body weighed down by its material properties, yet also paradoxically (probably following Paracelsus) the source of the “life-principle” that animates the body (1960 [1877], 1:218). This attempted distinction represents the tension between the German romantic nature religion and Neoplatonism, which would continue in her work and that of teachers in her lineage, especially as “astral” came to take on more negative connotations.

128 1960 (1877), 1:52.
or to be “inclined to some abnormal vice or other.” This she attributed to the “miracle-making elementals and disembodied devils,” who do not give mediums good health and “domestic happiness” but rather “desert them at the most critical moments of trial when under accusations of fraud.”¹²⁹ In contrast, she declared (without presenting supporting evidence), the “ancient thaumaturgist and apostle, generally, if not invariably, enjoyed good health.” Mediums may be pitied because they become unfit for other work, but the ones to blame are their patrons.¹³⁰

To further discourage the spiritualists, she warned that the followers of mediums were “drifting about on a sea of uncertainty like a ship without compass or rudder.”¹³¹

Spiritualism was a distraction and waste of time. Her later work became more detailed in advocating that the true purpose of spiritual life was not to receive comfort from departed relatives, but to transcend the body and progress towards knowledge and experience in higher realms. In fact, these had been twin goals of the established spiritualist movement, which bridled at her critique.

The capstone of her medium-mediator argument came with her elevation of the “mediators,” a move that supported her own legitimacy as an amanuensis who communicated with adepts. These higher beings had shed the lower portions of the soul and thus could be trusted to provide accurate and truthful information, unlike mediums. She drew the line between medium and mediator by distinguishing between the “God-like men” of the past—Neoplatonists and Alexandrian philosophers, who differed from

¹²⁹ Note: Blavatsky’s narrative blaming elementals for the effects of seances relies on descriptions of these beings by Éliphas Lévi (See Lavoie 2012, 45, 148). Elementals were also blamed for the sexual licentiousness of some mediums and singling them out was a way of “purifying” spiritualism (see Lavoie 2012, 60).
¹³⁰ 1960 (1877), 1:489–90.
¹³¹ 1960 (1877), 1:54.
the “sick-sensitives” of today. Realizing the clash between her two lines of argument, she qualified the *phenomena-as-law* narrative with the caveat that “[e]very person is a medium” only the sense that in that person’s “magnetic atmosphere the denizens of higher invisible spheres can move, and act, and live.”

For Blavatsky, the difference between medium and mediator is based on purity of thought and character and is measured by the “quality of the aura,” based in the “moral character of the medium.” Further, “if the temple is defiled by the admission of an evil passion, thought or desire, the mediator falls into the sphere of sorcery.” Taking the moral distinction one step further into healing, she clarified that mediums and healers must be moral in order to heal, a precept which she claimed had been taught by all true mediators.

Basing the medium-mediator distinction upon moral character would put her own character under scrutiny and be difficult to sustain, especially in light of the later abundant research collected as to the weak and immoral nature of many of the mediums tested by the Society for Psychical Research, who often displayed both fraud and genuine talent, as will become clear in chapter 4. Blavatsky herself appears to have lived a celibate life from the founding of the Theosophical Society until her death, but controversy raged around the question of her earlier life. There is evidence that she had at least one passionate romantic attachment, possibly gave birth to an out-of-wedlock child, and contracted an additional marriage. Her own past notwithstanding, Blavatsky’s

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133 1960 (1877), 1, 487.
134 1960 (1877), 1:218.
135 See Meade 1980. It has also been speculated that Blavatsky was a hermaphrodite, but it is beyond the scope of this project to examine the evidence, which appears slim enough to render speculation futile.
narrative of morality was compelling and developed in tension with the alleged objective and scientific aims to which the fledgling Theosophical Society had devoted itself. At times Blavatsky’s moral philosophy sounded suspiciously like the narrow morality of the Christian churches and missionaries which she vigorously opposed, and yet most progressive thinkers of the day promoted some kind of moral vision, including not only the liberal clergy discussed earlier in this chapter, but also Wallace and Hardinge Britten.

In Blavatsky’s work, the two clashing narratives—phenomena-as-law and medium-mediator—were blended with the notion of spiritual evolution; the substrate of this chemical reaction was the constant return to the principles of Western esotericism. We will return to the phenomena-as-law argument before the end of this chapter as we explore its role in Blavatsky’s salvation scheme.

Promote Western Esotericism as Ancient Wisdom and Alternative to Dogmatic Christianity

The most important underlying goal of Blavatsky’s creative theological blend was always to promote Western esoteric principles as she understood them. Blavatsky’s esoteric lodestone was specifically what she called “Hermetic philosophy” or “ancient wisdom.” In the introduction to Isis, she wrote, “Our work, then, is a plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology.”136 She used dramatic language to justify the superiority of the “Hermetic” approach:

On the brink of the dark chasm separating the spiritual from the physical

world stands modern science, with eyes closed and head averted, pronouncing the gulf impassable and bottomless, though she holds in her hand a torch which she need only lower into the depths to show her her mistake. But across this chasm, the patient student of Hermetic philosophy has constructed a bridge.\textsuperscript{137}

Of course, in promoting this ancient “Wisdom-Religion,” Blavatsky was smoothing the contradictions between the various systems of thought from which she drew. She did not identify a specific textual source for wisdom religion, describing it as a “secret doctrine” that had been passed down through the ages from master to student, and of which she was permitted to reveal only portions. Blavatsky built upon a narrative of secrecy and initiation already in progress as developed by Hardinge Britten as well as Hargrave Jennings (1817-1890), a popularizer of esoteric lore, and the novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), of whom more in chapter 5.

In Blavatsky’s version of the ancient wisdom tradition, the narrative of the magus becomes the narrative of the adept and later the Mahatmas, the advanced being who initiates selected humans into the secrets of controlling matter as well as salvation through a form of divinization. Her description of human destiny differs from the Christian in that salvation is \textit{achieved} when the individual, in part through developing natural magical powers, becomes not only able to control the forces of nature but also to transcend the mortal state and return to the original divine source. As in the spiritualist and modern heaven views, the Savior is not only deemphasized but almost absent, though

\textsuperscript{137} 1960 (1877), 1:xxii.
Jesus was seen as one of the adepts providing guidance, training, initiation, and ultimately, in later Theosophical systems, some form of salvation. But self-salvation was emphasized.

Blavatsky expressed contempt for organized Christianity, particularly the Church Fathers (for their denial of heretical narratives) and the Gospel writers (for their contradictions, late composition, and ignorance of pagan, i.e., Hellenistic, metaphysics). She offered an alternative to the biblical scriptures, which had lost much of their authority through historical criticism, causing “Christian theology,” she wrote, “to be suspected of complete bankruptcy.” But she often quoted scripture in proof of her views while applying heretical, including gnostic, interpretations of scripture. The Gospels, she affirmed, are so “puzzling and incomprehensible” that the “true, original Christianity, such as was preached by Jesus, is to be found only in the so-called Syrian heresies.”

Although she was writing prior to the famous 1945 discovery of a trove of gnostic books at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, as mentioned she had access to Pistis Sophia, a fifth-century CE text collating various gnostic ideas, which emphasized a Christian-oriented gnostic narrative. It described the soul as imprisoned in the world, attempting to escape the evil archons who rule it, ensnared by the passions, and rescued by Jesus, the “power of light.” Blavatsky called the gnostics “the only heirs to whose share had fallen a few stray crumbs of the unadulterated truth of primitive Christianity.” She, however, claimed to possess far more than crumbs.

138 1960 (1877), 2:249.
139 1960 (1877), 2:137.
140 See Pearson 2007, 252–53.
141 1960 (1877), 2:249.
Her theology was in reality a blend of gnosticism as she understood it, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, and Hermeticism, with an emphasis on its anti-material elements, and updated with more recent esoteric ideas from her favorite authors. Her frequent references to “Hermetism” in reality invoke a collection of recurring themes in her work: an emanationist cosmogony, a participatory salvation, a view of time that incorporates both progress and cyclical recurrence, and an uneasy adoption of Romantic philosophy, resulting in a primarily anti-material view of the world, the human body, and destiny. Although her narrative was filtered through the lens of Romanticism, when it came to describing the human body and soul she reverted back to the earliest stages of Neoplatonism and the Hermetic traditions, and perpetuated the tension between embodied and disembodied soul. Blavatsky referred to several translations of Hermetic texts in English and French, and settled on certain passages as pivot points of “Hermetic philosophy,” though she referenced them more often obliquely rather than by direct quotation.142

Kabbalism, Hermeticism, and Creation

Blavatsky developed theories of human evolution around a succession of four progressively dense human forms, or “races.” From a textual perspective, her elaborations on “double evolution” spin around citations from three sources: the Book of

142 Among the sources available to her were the 1650 English translation by John Everard (which was published in the United States in 1871 under the editorship of the occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph) as well as the 1867 French translation by Louis Ménard, and an 1882 English edition by John David Chambers. She also cited in a Hermetic context a translation of Koré Kosmou, or The Virgin of the World, by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland (1993 [1888], 1:671), as well as Foix-Candale’s 1579 French edition (1993 [1888], 2:96). She did not herself read Latin or Greek, though she also quoted in English from excerpts of the Hermetic fragments of Stobaeus, referencing an edition by Meineke Trübner, which was published in Greek with Latin annotations. These references no doubt represent Blavatsky’s habit of quoting primary materials from secondary sources.
Genesis, allegorical interpretations of Genesis from the Corpus Hermeticum, and a seventeenth-century Latin translation of parts of the Zohar, a thirteenth-century Kabbalistic text published in Spain. Genesis itself blends two ancient creation stories, which had the unintended consequence of inspiring gnostic and Hermetic creation myths that incorporated two different gods and two creations. Blavatsky believed that the books of Hermes had inspired Pythagoras and Plato, which perhaps explains why she gave Hermes a preeminent place in her own work.

Her interpretation of Hermetic creation accounts led to one of her most interesting theological extensions, the association of hermaphroditic bodies with prior and future human existence, a theme we will explore in this and future chapters. The theme emerged from her elaboration on the two creation stories of Genesis, found in the first and second-to-third chapters. In the first chapter, God says, “let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness…male and female” (1:26–28, NRSV). And further, “When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them ‘Humankind’ when they were created” (5:2, NRSV). A seeming second creation occurs in chapter 2, when God forms the first man, Adam, “from the dust of the ground,” and Eve from his rib. Blavatsky declared that “the first chapters of Genesis relate to the regeneration, or new birth of man, not to the creation of our universe and its crown work—MAN.” Genesis was a mystical and symbolic text for her, and she applauded Swedenborg’s interpretation of Genesis via “correspondences,” i.e., the “Hermetic symbolism” of “as above, so below.”143 Humans were created in imitation of the divine.

143 1960 (1877), 1:306.
Although Blavatsky did not quote it directly in *Isis*, she referenced the “double-sexed Deity” of the “Egyptian Pimander,” the “first intelligible manifestation of the Divine Spirit in material form.”

Corpus Hermeticum 1.18 elaborates upon the dual creation stories, declaring that the first creation was androgynous, and that there were seven androgyne generations following the creation, after which humans became sexed. The 1650 Everard translation, available to Blavatsky in Randolph’s 1871 edition, reads:

> When the period was fulfilled, the bond of all things was loosed and untied by the Will of God; for all living Creatures being Hermaphroditical, or Male and Female, were loosed and untied together with Man, and so the Males were apart by themselves, and the Females likewise. And straightway God saith to the Holy Word, Increase in increasing, and multiply in multitude all you my Creatures and Workmanships. And let him that is endued with Mind, know himself to be immortal; and that the cause of death is the love of the body, and let him learn all things that are.

The implication of the passage from the Corpus Hermeticum is that the androgynous state is more perfect or perfected and also prior to the less perfect gendered state.

The *Zohar*, a primary text of Kabbalism, provided its own gloss on the two creations of Genesis, and took their implication a step further. Julie Chajes has evaluated Blavatsky’s appropriation of Kabbalah and concluded that it is “a modern form of non-

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144 1960 (1877), 2:171.
145 Corp. herm. 1.18 (Everard 1650, 24; Randolph 1871, 37). The more recent translation by Salaman, Van Oyen, and Wharton (1999, 21) reads in part: “On completion of the cycle, the bond of all was loosed according to the will of God, for all living beings, which were of both genders [bisexual], were parted asunder at the same time as Man and became in turn male and female.”
Jewish, occultist Kabbalah...[that] emerged in dialogue with diverse modern textual sources on Kabbalah and other topics, and in response to contemporary intellectual and religious needs.” Nevertheless, Blavatsky did have access to some sources that provided reasonably accurate information about Jewish Kabbalah. Blavatsky cited *Kabbala Denudata*, a translation from Hebrew into Latin of various books of the Zohar published between 1677 and 1684 by the German linguist and philosopher Christian Knorr von Rosenroth. However, Simon Winchester and Chajes have demonstrated that she did not have access to Rosenroth directly, but relied on translations from Latin into English by Samuel Fales Dunlap, an American philologist, lawyer, and author of esoteric books.

The text of the Zohar was also translated into English by the British occultist MacGregor Mathers and published in 1887. Blavatsky used both translations in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) but in the 1877 *Isis*, she mentioned Rosenroth’s. The passage relating to Genesis comes from Rosenroth’s *Siphra de Zeniutha seu Liber Mysterii, sive Occultationis*, or as Mathers translated it, *The Book of Concealed Mystery*. Rosenroth, according to Andreas Kilcher, in translating Kabbalah directly from the Hebrew, “reached beyond the Christian Kabbalist of the Renaissance,” such as Pico della Mirandola, “and made a direct connection with...the Lurianic and Sabbatian Kabbalah.”

In chapter 1 of *Isis*, Blavatsky referred to an “old book,” an “ancient Hebrew document on occult learning,” usually taken to be the *Kabbalah Denudata*. This

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146 Chajes 2016, 68.
147 Winchester 2015, 57; Chajes 2016, 55–56.
148 2006, 671.
149 See Hanegraaff 2006, 645.
document, she wrote, describes an emanation from Adam which brings “a higher type of humanity” in its vortex. According to Blavatsky, the document reveals that previous to the creation of man, a “far more spiritual race” existed.\footnote{150 1960 (1877), 1:2.}

Several passages from Kabbalah Denudata’s “Book of Concealed Mystery” are relevant to the development of “double evolution.” Chapter 3, a complex commentary on the book of Genesis and the names of God YHVH and Elohim, declares God to be of both genders, and the first creation also of both genders, or in Latin, androgyno.\footnote{\S 3.22. In Mathers’s translation, which includes parenthetical comments by the author of the Zohar, we read: “(So also it is written, Gen i.26): ‘And Elohim said, Let us make man.’ (Where) it is not written HADM, Ha-Adam, ‘this man’; but Adam, man, simply, in antithesis of the Higher One who hath been made in the perfect name. When that one was perfected, this one also was perfected; but perfected as male and female, for the perfecting of all things” (1912, 84).} In other words, the first Adam was of both sexes. Blavatsky distinguished this bi-sexed creation from the gendered earthly Adam with the Kabbalistic term Adam Kadmon, the “primitive man” from whom emanated “the first races of men.”\footnote{152 Blavatsky might also have found support for the prior bi-sexed or asexual creation in the writings of Jakob Böhme, who developed his own asexual account of Adam as neither male nor female (not hermaphrodite either), in his own syncretic description of the afterlife. Böhme wrote: “Adam was a man and also a woman, and yet he was neither; but [he was] a virgin, full of chastity, discipline and purity, as the image of God” (Quoted in Hanegraaff 2005, 29). Böhme cited as evidence Matt. 22:30, a common proof text for a asexual afterlife, but now also employed to describe proto-human life. The verse states that at the resurrection “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” This unsexed body, according to Böhme, is the one humans will inhabit “after our resurrection” (Weeks 1991, 114–21).}

Like the Corpus Hermeticum, the “Book of Concealed Mystery” also went on to connect sexual generation with degeneration and sin. In Genesis, after the first couple’s sin of disobedience, God clothes them with “garments of skins,” or “coats of skins,” as the King James Version renders the passage (Gen 3:20). Blavatsky adopted the Kabbalistic interpretation that the description of God clothing Adam and Eve with “coats of skin” in fact described the progressive enfleshment of the human form. She wrote that
“matter has in time become, through sin, more gross and dense than it was at man’s first formation,” and explained that human bodies were eventually clothed with “coats of skin,” i.e., bodies of flesh.\textsuperscript{153}

Using the apocryphal Book of Enoch as allegory, Blavatsky began to tentatively map out different stages of human “evolution,” with an androgynous form preceding the gendered, and the original creation of two races, one “purely physical,” another “purely spiritual.” After these two “races,”\textsuperscript{154} a third was produced: the “the union of these two races produced a third—the Adamite Race. Sharing the natures of both its parents, it is equally adapted to existence in the material and spiritual worlds. Allied to the physical half of man’s nature is reason, which enables him to maintain his supremacy over the lower animals, and to subjugate nature to his uses. Allied to his spiritual part is his conscience, which will serve as his unerring guide through the besetments of the senses.”\textsuperscript{155} We can see here in the description of three “races” elements of the Neoplatonic as well as gnostic narrative of the descent of the soul. She later continued to describe dual evolution in connection with Kabbalistic language:

[M]an was intended from the first to be a being of both a progressive and retrogressive nature. Beginning at the apex of the divine cycle, he gradually began receding from the centre of Light, acquiring at every new and lower sphere of being (worlds each inhabited by a different race of human beings) a more solid physical form and losing a portion of his divine faculties. In the

\textsuperscript{153} 1960 (1877) 1:1–2.
\textsuperscript{154} The use of race here seems to refer to the entire human race, but in other contexts the meaning is less clear. See chapter 4 for a more complete treatment of Blavatsky’s theories on race.
\textsuperscript{155} 1960 (1877), 1:305.
‘fall of Adam’ we must see, not the personal transgression of man, but simply the law of the dual evolution.\textsuperscript{156}

Adam in Eden originally wore a “celestial garment,” she wrote, quoting the Zohar, before descending into “coats of skin,” where his “divine spark” began a “physical progression in a series of imprisonments from a stone up to a man’s body.”\textsuperscript{157} The alluded to “physical progression” from stone to man references another (and problematic from the perspective of her theories) of her favorite Kabbalistic proof texts: “A stone becomes a plant; a plant a beast; a beast a \textit{man}; a man a \textit{spirit}; and the spirit a god.”\textsuperscript{158} It is the transition between beast and man that became a source of the most difficult clashes and tensions in Blavatsky’s systems. When helpful and useful, she was willing to claim linkage between humans and animals, but she would quickly become uncomfortable with the relationship and reassert a fundamental lack of identity between humans and animals.

In \textit{Isis}, Blavatsky’s developing theory based on Genesis, Hermes, and Kabbalah incorporated three progressively more dense and material “races” of men—the bisexed, the gendered, and the “sons of God.” She continued to draw upon Genesis to describe the rudiments of what would become a fourth “race,” which she attempted to prove not only with text, but with fossil discoveries. Genesis implies that “sons of God” impregnated “daughters of men,” and their offspring are often described as “giants” (Gen 6:4, KJV). She referred to fossil discoveries that suggested earlier and larger races of men, and also argued that the “giants” of Genesis were man’s true ancestors.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{156} 1960 (1877), 2:276.
\textsuperscript{157} 1960 (1877), 2:277.
\textsuperscript{158} 1960 (1877), 1:302n2.
\textsuperscript{159} 1960 (1877), 1:304, 1:155.
This narrative eventually led her to speculate that several creations blended into one another, the original androgyne into gendered, followed by “sons of God,” and giants. For the “Chaldaean” Kabbalists, she declared, along with archaeologists, both describe cycles populated by succeeding races of men, “each of which races was less spiritual than its predecessor.”¹⁶⁰ We can see her attempting to harmonize an esoteric interpretation of the Bible with an acceptance of some kind of evolution in biology. Noting that flowers grow from buds, and buds from seeds, she asked, where does the seed of humanity come from? She answered:

The word *evolution* speaks for itself. The germ of the present human race must have preexisted in the parent of this race, as the seed, in which lies hidden the flower of next summer…the parent may be but *slightly* different, but it still differs from its future progeny. The antediluvian ancestors of the present elephant and lizard were, perhaps, the mammoth and the plesiosaurus; why should not the progenitors of our human race have been the ‘giants’ of the *Vedas*, the *völusp*a [Norse creation myth], and the Book of *Genesis*? While it is positively absurd to believe the ‘transformation of species’ to have taken place according to some of the more materialistic views of the evolutionists, it is but natural to think that each genus, beginning with the mollusks and ending with monkey-man, has modified from its own primordial and distinctive form.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ 1960 (1877), 1:152–53.
As of 1877, this line of argument led her to make another grandiose claim about the antiquity and superiority of the Hermetic narrative: “The whole Darwinian theory of natural selection is included in the first six chapters of the Book of Genesis.”¹⁶²

Summing up her growing list of four transformations, or races, of men, she wrote that the first “man” of chapter 1 is bi-sexed, while that of chapter 2 is created “male and female.” These “two races of beings” are followed by a third and fourth, “sons of God,” and “giants.”¹⁶³ This proposition became the foundation of her root race theory presented in The Secret Doctrine. As we will see, in her conceptual blending, Genesis and its Hermetic and Kabbalistic interpretations were the proof texts to which she returned again and again.

Blavatsky would have found support for a prior hermaphroditic creation in evolutionary science as well. Darwin had associated asexual and hermaphroditic reproduction with earlier and simpler organisms, and stated that a “remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphrodite or androgynous.”¹⁶⁴ Other biologists made similar speculations. But the sense that the hermaphroditic condition was prior to the gendered may have been what Blavatsky had in mind when she speculated that the two creation stories of Genesis prefigured Darwin.¹⁶⁵ However, her concept of the ability of species to form hybrids and transform is an almost cartoon-version of evolution, colored by popular nineteenth-century misapprehensions about the speed of natural selection and the possibility of bizarre hybrids. She also drew support from ancient myths of human-animal hybrids, particularly in Eastern religion.

¹⁶² 1960 (1877), 1:303.
¹⁶³ 1960 (1877), 1:303.
¹⁶⁴ 2006 (1871), 875.
¹⁶⁵ 1960 (1877), 1:303.
East and West—Perennialism

Although the core framework of Blavatsky’s evolutionism rests on Western esotericism, she also relied upon Asian ideas for crucial components of her proofs, in a revival of perennial philosophy (the idea that all religions teach the same basic philosophy beneath their superficial differences). It has been suggested that her turn to the East was a late development that occurred only in the context of her 1878 visit to India. For example, in The White Buddhist, Stephen Prothero argues that it was “only after the Theosophical Society failed to fulfill [the] original objective” of reforming American spiritualism and investigating occult phenomena that Olcott and Blavatsky began “to cast a collective glance to the East.”

While there was certainly a shift in emphasis and authority towards the East between the publication of Isis in 1877 and The Secret Doctrine in 1888, reverence for Asian wisdom was present from the beginning, not only in Blavatsky’s writings but also in those of the spiritualists that influenced her, such as Hardinge Britten, as well as in Transcendentalism. Prothero is correct that the overt Eastern emphasis was a later development, as was Blavatsky’s shift from adepts based in a romanticized Egypt to Asian teachers. But her syncretic project requires quite a bit more nuance.

An evaluation of Isis shows that Blavatsky used the East to buttress her position from the beginning. As pointed out by Barry Thompson, librarian of the Theosophical Society in England, in spite of the shift in emphasis between Isis and the later Secret Doctrine, Blavatsky used many of the same sources for both books. Of the 1,200

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166 See Schmitt 1966 and also the note in the introduction on the difference between prisca theologia and perennialism.
bibliographical references in *Isis* and the 1,500 in the *Secret Doctrine*, 146 are common.\(^{168}\) Among the common citations are books about Buddhism as well as translations of well-known Hindu texts of varying degrees of antiquity such as the Atharva-Veda, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Chandogya Upanishad.\(^{169}\) Blavatsky’s view of the East was filtered by her primary influences, which included Louis Jacolliot (1837-1890), a French judge and amateur scholar who spent time in India and believed the East to be the source of many Western esoteric traditions.

*Isis* includes a number of statements about the identity between Eastern and Western religion that draw upon the perennial philosophy tradition and form the foundation of Blavatsky’s ancient wisdom narrative, which she elaborated and further developed during her India period. In *Isis* she declared that the Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas antedate the Bible, that the Kabbalistic “secret doctrine” comes from “Upper India, or Turkestan,” and that the shared “identity of the Pythagorean and Brahmanical systems” is “beyond dispute.”\(^{170}\) Finally, she described the Hermetic goal of deification as identical to the Buddhist nirvana.\(^{171}\)

She also sought to put the Vedas on an equal footing with modern science, declaring that “Vedic philosophy” with its doctrine of “emanation and absorption” represents the “first vestiges” of “the discoveries of the indestructibility of matter and force-correlation.”\(^{172}\) And she hit upon the similarities between the Vedic time frames of earth history, which were far longer than those proposed in any Western religious system,

\(^{168}\) Thompson 2014.
\(^{169}\) These are major texts from three periods in India’s history. Although dates of composition are contested, the Vedas probably date from before c. 1000 BCE, the Upanishads from c. 800 to 300 BCE, and the Bhagavad-Gita from sometime between the fourth to the second century BCE.
\(^{171}\) 1960 (1877) 1:624.
\(^{172}\) 1960 (1877) 1:241–42.
and the long geological time frames being elaborated upon by the geologists of her day. She wrote of how the Hindus believed that the world was more than 4.2 billion years old, and that the current era was “not even half of the time allotted to the world,” and compared the age of the world to the “great year” of Aristotle.\footnote{173}

Her attitude towards Eastern religion developed into a type of perennialism. Blavatsky wrote in *Isis*: “It is by the spirit of the teachings of both Buddha and Pythagoras, that we can so easily recognize the identity of their doctrines…. Every man may become a Buddha, says the doctrine. And so throughout the interminable series of ages we find now and then men who more or less succeed in uniting themselves ‘with God,’ as the expression goes, with their own spirit, as we ought to translate.”\footnote{174} The narrative that all great avatars and saints, including Jesus and Buddha, were “gods” who transcended mortal life becomes important in the dialog surrounding evolutionary esotericisms. In the Mahatmas, as we will see in the next chapter, it blended with the Chambers proposal that there exists a “grand crowning type”—more advanced beings who forge a path for the transformation of the species.

Several concepts crucial to Blavatsky’s evolutionary esotericism developed out of Eastern religion. She argued that the symbols and iconography of all religions could reveal truths about the human evolutionary past, and claimed that the Hindu sages were ancestors of modern science.\footnote{175} She was not the first to note similarities between extinct species and the human-animal hybrids of comparative mythology. And she also found support in bi-sexed Indian divinities for her theory of a prior hermaphroditic race.\footnote{176}

\footnote{173 1960 (1877), 1: 32, 30.}
\footnote{174 1960 (1877), 1:291.}
\footnote{175 1960 (1877), 1:98.}
\footnote{176 It is worth noting that the bi-sexed or hermaphroditic gods tend to be depicted as more predominantly}
Blavatsky attempted to harmonize Hindu with “Chaldaean” doctrines, by which she meant an occultist form of Kabbalah, claiming that they “agree in every respect with the evolutionary theory of modern science.”

The Hindu god Vishnu had traditionally been seen as having incarnated in a series of animals before taking on human form. Blavatsky included in Isis a large diagram of the “avatars” of Vishnu and stated that it represents “the gradual evolution and transformation of all species out of the ante-Silurian mud of Darwin.” She developed this theory further in a quotation from Jacolliot’s Christna et le Christ, which claimed to directly present the Hindu laws of Manu. “Man will traverse the universe, gradually ascending, and passing through the rocks, the plants, the worms, insects, fish, serpents, tortoises, wild animals, cattle, and higher animals.”

This passage not only parallels Spencer’s notion of evolution as an increase in heterogeneity, but also Blavatsky’s favorite Kabbalistic axiom of stone into plant, etc. No doubt as these seeming corroborations piled up, they contributed to her feeling of the truth of her insights.

But the adoption of Eastern ideas was not without its hazards to the coherence of her system. In tension with the idea of an upward ascent of the human spirit from stones to gods is the idea that human races were at one time more spiritually advanced than in male, rather than a balance of both genders. For this phenomenon in India, see Doniger 2014; the supposedly bi-sexed Adam Kadmon is also usually shown with predominantly masculine features.

177 1960 (1877), 2:266.

178 1960 (1877), 2:275. Note that when Blavatsky uses the term “Silurian,” she is most likely drawing from the 1874 description of geological time developed by the American geologist James Dwight Dana, who proposed twelve periods, and forty “epochs,” going back millions of years. Dana, like most geologists of his day, postulated that the earth was millions of years old, but did not identify specific time periods for each period. Dana proposed that a “Silurian Age,” an age of invertebrates, preceded the Devonian age of fishes, which was followed by a Carboniferous, an age of Reptiles and finally, an age of Mammals (divided into Eocene, Miocene, and Pliocene). This system was more complex than the 1833 system of Lyell. See Jaffe 2000, vi–vii.

179 Quoted in 1960 (1877), 1:620–21.
the present. When did this degeneration of spirit take place if life was simultaneously developing from rocks into animals and humans? In Isis, she used her definition of the Hindu word *Pitris*, a term used to describe disembodied spirits, to support her theory that human races had once been more spiritually advanced than at present. “The Pitris,” she wrote, “are not the ancestors of the present living men, but those of the human kind or Adamic race; the spirits of human races which, on the great scale of descending evolution, preceded our races of men, and were physically, as well as spiritually, far superior to our modern pigmies.”

Her system is thus premised on the idea that superior forms of humanity predated the modern human. This question was resolved with her root race theory, but not entirely satisfactorily, as we will see in chapter 5. Its more difficult aspects reflect the tension between the emanationist model of creatures proceeding from a divine source in ever-more-material forms and the slow transformation of simple creatures into the more complex which was emerging in the biological model.

Another incoherence arose from the question of reincarnation in the East. The Jacolliot quotation regarding the laws of Manu suggested two possibilities: Did its description of humans “gradually ascending” through animals into progressively higher forms describe an individual soul experiencing life in various forms through reincarnation, or was it describing the gradual change of species from one into the other as depicted in scientific evolutionism? For Hindus and Buddhists, the obvious implication was that the soul was simply incarnating in different species, in bodies whose type remained static.

180 1960 (1877), 1:xxxviii.
But Blavatsky resisted a reincarnationist interpretation in *Isis*, and left her citations of Kabbalistic and Vedic texts to suggest a kind of vague harmony. She was particularly uncomfortable with the idea that a human could regress by being incarnated in an animal form, which was a common notion in the East. In *Isis*, she explicitly denied reincarnation, but later incorporated it as a fundamental aspect of her evolutionism in *The Secret Doctrine*. This seeming contradiction embroiled her in controversy, but as Lavoie and others have noted, her rejection of reincarnation in *Isis* probably had more to do with her relationship with spiritualism.\(^{181}\) Simple endorsement of reincarnation would have offended spiritualists, many of whom rejected reincarnation, particularly Emma Hardinge Britten, whom Blavatsky was, at that time, trying to impress.\(^{182}\) For if the soul is bifurcated, which part of it reincarnates? Until this point, many of the Western evolutionary progress narratives had not made reincarnation a central focus, though it was present in Neoplatonic systems, as well as Lessing’s. We will return to the question of reincarnation in Blavatsky’s system in chapter 6.

In the end Blavatsky took inspiration for her evolutionary system not only from Western esotericism or Eastern religion, but other religions and the myths of primitive societies, which she saw as preserving traces of human evolutionary history. She cited the

\(^{181}\) See Lavoie 2012, 188–89.

\(^{182}\) Hardinge Britten had given a speech before the Boston Spiritualist Association in 1873 in which she stated her opposition to the “baleful doctrine of re-incarnation as taught by Allen (sic) Kardec of France” (cited in Lavoie 2012, 307–8). In the same speech, she also denounced “free love” doctrines. Demarest speculates that Hardinge Britten’s opposition to reincarnation also had to do with her uncomfortability with these “free love” doctrines, promoted by some spiritualists, which sounded scandalous in their day, but were largely about a woman’s right to choose whether to have sex, even within marriage, to divorce, and to procreate. For Hardinge Britten, reform of spiritualism included purging the “free love” and reincarnationist (Kardecian) elements (see Demarest vii). In addition, there were worries that spiritualism would split over the question of reincarnation. In 1875, Hardinge Britten published an attack on reincarnationists in *The Spiritual Scientist*. According to Demarest, many of those who left mainstream spiritualism had joined “communions that emphasized some kind of reincarnationist idea” (xlviii). By July 1876, Hardinge Britten had resigned from the Theosophical Society (Lavoie 2012, 313).
mythology of the meso-American *Popul-Vuh* as well as Egypt, Greece, and “Chaldaean” legend as sources of truths of evolution.\(^{183}\) She invoked ancient human-animal hybrids on the temple walls of Egypt and Babylon as proving the existence of an “ancient theory of evolution.”\(^{184}\) This theory, she argued, could also be seen in other human-animal hybrids on temple walls worldwide. Always, the ancients knew more than scientists of today: “Cosmogonical legends all over the world are based on a knowledge by the ancients of those sciences which have allied themselves in our days to support the doctrine of evolution.”\(^{185}\) Blavatsky defended her system as more scientific than that of modern science, whose truth would ultimately be acknowledged when the complete history of the world was known.

*The Great Chain Becomes a Great Arc*

Whereas in the past, thinkers adapting the great chain metaphor had struggled with the question of whether it was static or dynamic, and uni- or bi-directional, Blavatsky proposed to solve the problem by describing the chain as a great arc. Her emanationist salvation scheme views creation as a materialization process and salvation as an etherealization process—that is, that the higher forms of life, the god-like sages, are less material than are humans, just as animals are more material. In Blavatsky’s narrative, the missing link is the connection of the ethereal soul or spirit with the lowest links in the chain—through sin, happenstance, or divine plan. Blavatsky did not choose an option in *Isis* but attempted to explain the arc by differentiating “emanationists” such as the

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\(^{183}\) 1960 (1877), 1:133–34.
\(^{184}\) 1960 (1877), 1:154.
\(^{185}\) 1960 (1877), 1:134.
esotericists from scientific evolutionists:

In Evolution, as it is now beginning to be understood, there is supposed to be in all matter an impulse to take on a higher form—a supposition clearly expressed by Manu and other Hindu philosophers….The controversy between the followers of this school and the Emanationists may be briefly stated thus: The Evolutionist stops all inquiry at the borders of ‘the Unknowable’; the Emanationist believes that nothing can be evolved—or, as the word means, unwombed or born—except it has first been involved, thus indicating that life is from a spiritual potency above the whole.\(^\text{186}\)

The idea of salvation as progressive etherealization is a common one and many religions portray the afterlife as experienced in a body that is somehow human but less material. Matthew 22:29 refers to human life after the resurrection as “angels in heaven,” and Jesus’s own resurrection body as described in John 20 has often been seen as a prototype for our own future bodies—solid enough to touch but able to walk through walls.

Blavatsky took up this metaphorical territory and inked in a firm prior downward arc, describing bodies as the materialization of light just as planets are the coalescence of clouds of gas.\(^\text{187}\) She explained that the higher “entities” and “elementals” were actually still made of matter, but of a finer sort of matter. She referenced a description of the principle of plenitude from Bulwer-Lytton’s 1842 novel *Zanoni* to demonstrate that many beings populate space, just as they populate the biological world: “millions of beings, not

\(^{186}\) 1960 (1877), 1:xxxii.

\(^{187}\) 1960 (1877), 1:285.
literally spiritual, for they have all, like the animalcula unseen by the naked eye, certain forms of matter, though matter so delicate, air-drawn, and subtile, that it is, as it were, but a film, a gossamer, that clothes the spirit.”

The arc thus rests, in some sense, on the topmost branch of the Darwinian tree, but its bottom is muddied by continuing confusion about the relationship of humans to other forms of life. In Blavatsky’s developing chain metaphor, one obvious area of tension is the relationship between humans and animals; this relationship addresses not only the question of whether human souls can incarnate in animal forms but also ontological questions about all of nature. On the one hand, she portrayed nature as alive in a panentheist vision; on the other, man as unique. Like many Platonists and esotericists before her, Blavatsky would on the one hand emphasize the connection of all living things, endowing animals with rights, talents and emotions, while on another minimizing it, warning that animal passions can pollute the human soul.

In attempting to describe the living nature and ensoulment of animals, she echoed Chambers’s assertion that there was little difference in scale between primitive humans and primates, stating that “the orang-outang of Borneo is little, if any, inferior to the savage man in intelligence” and can be placed “at least on a level with many a flat-headed Australian.” She cited Wallace in proof: “Says Mr. Wallace, ‘The mental requirements of savages, and the faculties actually exercised by them, are very little above those of the animals.’”

She eventually hit upon the following criteria for distinguishing animals from

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188 1960 (1877), 1:286, quoting Bulwer-Lytton.
189 1960 (1877), 1:xxix.
190 1960 (1877), 1:326.
humans—animals have a dual nature (soul and body), whereas humans have a three-fold nature. The soul is “astral,” and cannot experience reward or punishment in the afterlife but the spirit lives on.\textsuperscript{191} Blavatsky was only too ready to use animals when she needed them to talk about unusual human talents or to promote vegetarianism. (She argued that humans should be as kind as the elephants who cared enough not to step on other animals and compared chickens with human mothers in their supposed ability to influence the physiognomy of their offspring through the power of imagination.\textsuperscript{192}) But when it came to questions of morality and salvation she was quick to blame them for the passions, as had many before her, and to describe not one but repeated human declines to a near-animal state. But in spite of temporary ups and downs, the primary direction of evolution as described in \textit{Isis} is in an arc which first descends, then ascends.\textsuperscript{193} I argue that several of her creative leaps came from her need to maintain this “great arc” as one of her lodestones while also continuing the awkward marriage with unidirectional Darwinian evolution.

The narrative that begins to emerge in \textit{Isis} incorporates ancient traditions of progress, decline, and cyclic time. Although it was once commonplace to assert that progress was unknown in antiquity, in actuality, in classical Greece, the notion of progress competed with other theories of human development, including the idea that present-day civilization represented a decline from past ages of perfection, associated with the metals gold and silver.\textsuperscript{194} The idea of recurrence, or cyclical history, was also

\textsuperscript{191} 1960 (1877), 1:327.
\textsuperscript{192} 1960 (1877), 2:279, 1:385.
\textsuperscript{193} 1960 (1877), 1:293–99.
\textsuperscript{194} See Edelstein 1967.
present in ancient times, and was favored by Blavatsky, who drew upon the decline narrative of Hesiod and the cycles of the Hermetic texts. We will discuss further in chapter 6 the question of progress, regress, and cycles, an often confusing view of time that developed tensions with the other aspects of Blavatsky’s system.

Just as Darwinian natural selection had made the single vertical great chain untenable to biological evolutionary thought, so the arc ultimately fails to account for all the traditions jostling for harmony in Blavatsky’s system. When she used the chain metaphor, she described it more as a network running through the entire universe, or a giant roller coaster filled with cosmic loop-de-loops:

Like an immense chain whose upper end, the alpha, remains invisibly emanating from a Deity…it encircles our globe in every direction; it leaves not even the darkest corner unvisited, before the other end, the omega, turns back on its way to be again received where it first emanated. On this divine chain was strung the exoteric symbology of every people…under their diverse ideal types of the universe of matter, symbolizing its vivifying principles, the uncorrupted immaterial image of the spirit guiding them is the same.

She would later use the chain metaphor not only to describe the unity of world’s religions and their “vivifying principles,” but would also extend it into her description of progressively more etherealized globes. For in Isis, she had suggested that it was not

196 1960 (1877), 1:560.
197 See also Hardinge Britten’s Art Magic, which also incorporates a chain metaphor into its cosmic system: “The Universe is an endless chain of worlds in which spiritual spheres above, and semi-spiritual spheres
only human beings but also planets that “evolved” from material to spiritual.\textsuperscript{198} These tentative thoughts developed into a full-on theory of multiple globes, part of Blavatsky’s unwieldy \textit{Secret Doctrine}. Her vision, discussed further in chapter 5, became more deterministic in its later incarnations, and is often in tension with humanistic ideas of free will and participatory salvation.

\textit{Mesmerism, Evolution and Salvation}

The final piece in Blavatsky’s vision of evolution as salvation concerns mesmeric or mediumistic talents, which she had all along used as proof of the existence of natural law. These talents were also supposed to have been possessed by all of the great adepts in her lineage of “mediators.” The question then becomes: what do humans need to do in order to progress towards a more ethereal state, and move back up the chain or arc? Should they perform ascetic practices as did the religious who often displayed such phenomena? Did prayer and traditional worship make a difference? And was it important to heal the body on its way towards becoming ethereal? These sorts of questions had preoccupied teachers in the esoteric traditions from which Blavatsky drew, and she could not jettison them. Consequently, she incorporated them into her system, with the implication that salvation as spiritual evolution required some sort of discipline and practice, whether of mind, body, or both.

From the beginning of \textit{Isis}, Blavatsky took up and enriched the common spiritualist narrative that the contemporary practice of medicine left much to be desired.

\textsuperscript{198} 1960 (1877), 1:255.
“Modern medicine, while it has gained largely in anatomy, physiology, and pathology, and even in therapeutics, has lost immensely by its narrowness of spirit, its rigid materialism, its sectarian dogmatism.” Things were better, as always, in the past, when ancient sages possessed of healing techniques that had since been lost: “The explorers of old medical literature, from the time of Hippocrates to that of Paracelsus and Van Helmont, will find a vast number of well-attested physiological and psychological facts and of measure or medicines for healing the sick which modern physicians superciliously refuse to employ.”

Blavatsky lionized Paracelsus, the great innovator in medicine, as the originator of theosophy, and referred to him throughout both *Isis* and the *Secret Doctrine*. She connected his work with mesmerism, and his ideas were seeded into the development of double evolution. She said that mesmerism had a “dual sense of a physical and spiritual phenomenon.” Thus she linked healing of the body with the healing of the soul, and left space for establishing a relationship between psychology, medicine, and salvation. She speculated that a “patient study of the works of the theurgists” would “mark the dawn of new and important discoveries in the field of psychology.”

She repeatedly touched on the question of the relationship between mind and body. In her narrative, the “imagination,” will, instinct, and prayer were ways of bridging the gap. Using language that would have been congenial to Myers, she wrote, “When psychology and physiology become worthy of the name of sciences, Europeans will be convinced of the weird and formidable potency existing in the human will and

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199 1960 (1877), 1:20.
200 1960 (1877), 1:84.
201 1960 (1877) 1:335.
imagination, whether exercised consciously or otherwise.”202 She was touching now on not only the power of healing, but of creation itself. 

Ignoring Darwin on instinct, but echoing Hardinge Britten, she connected instinct with the spiritual (and feminine) side of life but called for its scientific study: “Like everything else which has its origin in psychological mysteries,” she wrote, “instinct has been too long neglected in the domain of science,” and went on to quote Hippocrates: “it is to instinct alone that we owe our first remedies.”203

She at times appeared to advocate the development of intuition as a part of the evolutionary process

Every human being is born with the rudiment of the inner sense called

intuition, which may be developed into what the Scotch know as ‘second sight.’… That which supports the faith of man in God and a spiritual life to come is intuition; that divine outcome of our inner-self…. This ineradicable feeling of the presence of some one outside and inside ourselves is one that no dogmatic contradictions, nor external form of worship can destroy in humanity, let scientists and clergy do what they may.204

But she really could not make up her mind as to whether it was a good or a bad thing for people to develop their psychic talents. She claimed to have discovered a dark tale in the Popul-Vuh in which the so-called fourth race of man, the giants, became wicked through misuse of their innate mesmeric talents. This fourth race was “born with

204 1960 (1877), 1:434-5.
a sight which embraced all hidden things, and was independent of both distance and material obstacle…. They were, perhaps, what we would now term ‘natural-born mediums,’ who neither struggled nor suffered to obtain their knowledge.” These “born adepts” came under the control of a demon, and the continent of Atlantis where they lived became a “nation of wicked magicians,” leading to war, giants, and the Flood of Noah, which she considered an allegory for the destruction of the so-called lost continent.\(^\text{205}\)

But she would from time to time pick up on the idea that the previous human races possessed talents that were ready to be developed again in the present and future races. She also often returned to the idea that the imagination is the key to creation, and has been since the first Hermetic demiurges created the world and humankind. She wrote:

> If the soul of man is really an outcome of the essence of this universal soul, an infinitesimal fragment of this first creative principle, it must of necessity partake in degree of all the attributes of the demiurgic power. As the creator, breaking up the chaotic mass of dead, inactive matter, shaped it into form, so man, if he knew his powers, could, to a degree, do the same.\(^\text{206}\)

She connected the power of creation with an evolutionary narrative. In the preface to \textit{Isis}, she wrote:

> Is it too much to believe that man should be developing new sensibilities and a closer relation with nature? The logic of evolution must teach as much, if carried to its legitimate conclusions. If, somewhere, in the line of ascent from

\(^{205}\) 1960 (1877), 1:593.  
\(^{206}\) 1960 (1877), 1:396–97.
vegetable or ascidian to the noblest man a soul was evolved, gifted with
intellectual qualities, it cannot be unreasonable to infer and believe that a
faculty of perception is also growing in man, enabling him to descry facts and
truths even beyond our ordinary ken.\footnote{1960 (1877), 1:v.}

In these speculations, then, we see the development of one of the central
components of the evolutionary esotericism described by Roszak a century after the
founding of the Theosophical Society—the idea that the development of latent “psychic”
and healing talents could promote evolution into more advanced forms of life. To fully
trace the development of this narrative is beyond the scope of the present work. But
Blavatsky was clearly an influential and active contributor. Though she was borrowing
from others, her influential recombination did have an impact on many other systems. In
chapter 7, we will take up the question of whether she directly or indirectly influenced
Myers, who took some of these same components and put them together in quite a
different way. The table below summarizes the components of Blavatsky’s evolutionary
esotericism as of 1877. Blending theory will be used to evaluate these components in
chapter 8.

\textbf{Table 13: Components of Double Evolution in Blavatsky’s Isis Unveiled}

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The origins of physical life are unknown, but spirit vivifies matter and life ascends from stones to plants to lower animals and higher animals, including humans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Evolution is &quot;double,&quot; of soul and body, which simplifies and completes Darwinian theory. The human physical form is a &quot;product of evolution,&quot; arising from Darwin's &quot;four or five&quot; progenitors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Humans most likely evolved out of the &quot;spiritual part of the ether,&quot; as &quot;monads&quot; which become human.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Higher intelligences (not necessarily God as we understand him) but more advanced beings originally gave humans mind. Humans are</td>
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intended to continue to develop their intellectual and spiritual nature after death.

5. Humans were created in imitation of the divine. More spiritual, androgynous humans preceded sexed. Matter gradually conquered spirit and "divine faculties" were lost.

6. The first four races of man were each more material than the predecessor: hermaphroditic and unfleshed, gendered, and flesched, sons of God, and giants. Yet they were also superior to modern humans.

7. Mind sets humans apart from animals, and mental powers are a part of human "psychical and spiritual evolution."

8. Humans are tripartite—body, soul (irrational), and spirit. Soul decays after death, while spirit ascends to divine union.

9. Spiritualist phenomena demonstrate that some can use the forces of nature, only adepts and god-like humans with control of the passions can exercise divine gifts.

10. Humans can become adepts and initiates and thus achieve salvation through developing natural magical powers such as healing, and use the forces of nature to transcend the mortal state.
Chapter 5: Latent Talents and Salvation by Evolution

The eye of a Cashmere girl is able to see objectively a color which does exist, but which being inappreciable by the European, is therefore non-existent for him. Why then not concede, that some peculiarly-endowed organisms, which are thought to be possessed of that mysterious faculty called second sight, see their pictures as objectively as the girl sees the colors?

—Helena Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*.1

Psychic or mediumistic abilities were the cornerstone of Blavatsky’s phenomena-as-law argument in *Isis*. And by implication they were the hallmark of advanced evolution displayed by adepts or at least proof of the natural laws governing “evolution.” But when she further developed this theory in *The Secret Doctrine*, she solved some of the problems that had plagued her in the writing of *Isis* but also introduced outlandish and bizarre elements. These elements were frequently omitted by later evolutionary esotericisms, such as that of Myers as well as Blavatsky’s successors in the Theosophical Society. At the same time, some components of her systems later achieved broad influence across the globe, including in India, where Western-educated Hindus were struggling to come to terms with their own cultural heritage in light of Western science.2

As we have seen, the idea of human descent from animals had opened up a wide range of philosophical, scientific, and literary proposals for describing their relationship, with the arrow indicating evolutionary “progress” at times pointed both backwards and

1 1960 (1877), 1:211–12.
forwards. Indeed, it seemed that it was difficult to conceive of these talents without the metaphorical assumption that they were being recovered from an earlier state of evolution, whether more primitive or advanced. The need to resolve this question is one of the driving factors of Blavatsky’s complex root-race theory. Although some speculated that humans would in the future develop entirely new talents as they continued the upward trajectory of progress from animals, others speculated that they were destined to recover or restore lost vestigial talents of animals or earlier more advanced human civilizations, or that, as Blavatsky had speculated in *Isis*, all possible human capabilities were preformed in a primal germ. As suggested by Kripal, a good shorthand way of referring to the two primary ways of thinking about these talents is as the *vestigial* and *potential* models, although they overlap in some systems.

One of the components of the general evolutionary esotericism identified by Roszak (in my summary) is that “unusual powers of mind are talents that all will one day possess as humans ‘evolve.’” We have seen the contributions made to this idea by Warren Felt Evans and Andrew Jackson Davis between 1850 and 1865. They predicted that future humans would have more developed internal senses and psychic talents.

The thinkers Blavatsky drew from were not consistent on the question of whether their system was backwards or forward-looking. In *Isis*, she had suggested the possibility of the inheritance of mediumistic talents, and that previous “races” of men possessed talents that would be recovered in present and future races. In fact, one of the unwritten goals of her work, as I have argued, was to redefine salvation as evolution and the development of mesmeric talents as a component of that salvation. However, due to the clashes between her phenomena-as-law argument and her medium-messenger arguments,
as well as a desire to satisfy her new Hindu followers, she came to deemphasize the importance of cultivating these talents.

It was not only esoteric speculators who imagined that vestigial and disused animal capacities might be reawakened in humans. Darwin himself had engaged in a measured speculation that humans could restore capabilities from their animal forebears. He used as an example the ability of some humans to move their ears. Describing the “rudimentary” and “variable” nature of the function of “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” muscles, he wrote:

I have seen one man who could draw his ears forwards, and another who could draw them backwards; and from what one of these persons told me, it is probable that most of us could by repeated trials recover some power of movement. The faculty of erecting the ears and of directing them to different points of the compass, is no doubt of the highest service to many animals, as they thus perceive the point of danger; but I have never heard of a man who possessed the least power of erecting his ears.3

Darwin also noted that a “little blunt point” on the ear is “slightly pointed” in “many monkeys,” leading him to propose that the point is a “vestige of formerly pointed ears—which occasionally reappears in man.”4 Is it possible that Darwin’s casual suggestion here planted the seeds of more elaborate visions of human recovery of lost animal talents? Or perhaps he was simply stating an obvious fact that could be built upon

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3 2006 (1871), 789.
4 2006 (1871), 790.
in different ways. I have found no evidence that any of the esoteric thinkers reviewed here built upon Darwin’s speculations on ears. Nevertheless, ideas about slow but perceptible evolution of new skills were in the Victorian intellectual soup. The popular novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton centered the plot of his novel *The Coming Race* around the gradual development over generations of a “visible nerve” in the hand, which coincided with the achievement of extraordinary powers.

Bulwer-Lytton, who often developed occult themes around contemporary political and scientific developments, had presented in his novel *Zanoni* an in-depth and religious portrayal of Rosicrucian adepts influencing European history. *The Coming Race*, published in 1871 in time to be referenced in *Isis*, and in the same year as Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, seems to reference not only Darwinian natural selection but also Wallace and other evolutionary theorists. Although much of the work is a tongue-in-cheek utopian vision exploring Victorian tensions over gender and race, it occasionally takes its religious vision and asceticism seriously. Blavatsky revered the novel as either lost ancient history or a prescient vision. She saw Bulwer-Lytton as a genius and probable occult adept, though he never admitted to any particular esoteric allegiances. *The Coming Race*, especially its treatment of human psychic talents, is reflected in *The Secret Doctrine* and is therefore worth reviewing here.

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5 Blavatsky does mention Darwin’s vestigial organs, but in the context of an argument against the descent of man from pithecoïd (ape-like) species: “Some of these organs, it is asserted, could not have had any scope for employment, except for a semi-animal, semi-arboreal monster” such as the “vermiform appendix of the coecum, the ear muscles, the ‘rudimentary tail’, etc. etc.?” (1993 [1888], 2:681).
Culture and the Development of Psychic Powers: Bulwer-Lytton’s Coming Race

A mysterious energy called *vril*, much like the Force of the *Star Wars* films, is at the center of the novel, which was originally titled *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race*. Previous scholarly treatment has focused on the novel’s portrayal of race, gender, and colonial power. Other scholars have noted its influence on Blavatsky. Less time is spent discussing its religious and spiritual assumptions and its commentary on evolution, but David Seed has reviewed its use of Darwin. The novel attempts a synthesized spiritual-material vision of the “race” known as the Vril-ya, who both mirror and threaten the human race.

Although Bulwer-Lytton had maintained that *vril* was not related to mesmerism’s magnetic fluid but to electricity, Blavatsky claimed in *Isis* that it was identical with both of these as well as other postulated invisible forms of energy, writing:

[T]he Astral light of Eliphas Levi; the nerve-aura and the fluid of the magnetists; the *od* of Reichenbach…the atmospheric magnetism of some naturalists; galvanism; and finally, electricity, are but various names for many different manifestations, or effects of the same mysterious, all-pervading cause…. Sir E. Bulwer-Lytton, in his *Coming Race*, describes it as the *VRIL*…and allowed his readers to take it for a fiction.

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7 See Trompf 2013.
8 2005, xxii-xxv.
9 Seed 2005, xxxix.
10 1960 (1877) 1:125–26. It is worth noting that this passage parallels one from Lévi, which describes a “universal agent of the works of nature” as “the *Od* of the Hebrews and of Reichenbach, and the Astral Light of the Martinists…. [that] explains the entire theory of prodigies and miracles, and why diabolical and
The novel follows an unnamed narrator, a well-to-do young American man studying commerce in England who becomes trapped underground while exploring a mine. The narrator soon realizes that the nether regions are populated by an entire civilization much more advanced than his own. The civilization is powered by the vril force. The word vril suggests both the Latin vir, or man, as well as the strength and vigor implied by virile. Vril requires both skill and genetic predisposition to operate, and the narrator is unable to use it during his underground adventures.

Its range of uses is seemingly unlimited—it not only provides illumination for the underground caverns but can be used to influence the subterranean climate, and it powers the automatons that perform most of the physical labor. It is a “subtle and life-giving medium” that can be used to read thoughts, but also to transmit thoughts to the divinity. Vril can also heal, and its effects are compared by the narrator to those of “mesmerism” or “electro-biology.” A rejuvenation bath “charged with vril” is taken up to four times per year by the healthy; vril is also used to cure “nearly all their diseases.”

Selected individuals possess “Vril Staffs,” which are quasi-mechanical but require mental or spiritual power to manipulate. They can be used to heal or destroy, and are powerful enough to annihilate whole armies, melt rocks, and levitate large objects. Some members of the Vril-ya are better than others at channeling vril. Females are said to be especially good at perceiving and manipulating its invisible force, based on their “finer

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11 Bulwer Lytton 1979 (1871), 34.
12 1979 (1871), 53.
13 1979 (1871), 47.
nervous organization.”14 In spite of Bulwer-Lytton’s assertion that vril was only comparable to electricity, his descriptions reflect other popular notions of invisible forces, such as the ether postulated by some Victorian scientists, or mesmerism’s magnetic fluid, which was seen as a universal force mediating between the material and spiritual worlds. Writing in a scientific-mystical register, Bulwer-Lytton suggested that vril operates by simply changing the motion of the atoms that make up matter.

Our focus is on the religious views that Bulwer-Lytton promoted in the novel, and what it says about how the human species might be transformed. Reflecting the confusion of Victorian race theory, of which more later, he did not make it entirely clear whether the Vril-ya are meant only as a separate human race or an entirely different species. The narrator speculates that their language came from a common forerunner of Sanskrit and that they share “Aryan” ancestors with humans.15 We are told that they refuse to breed with other tribes who cannot use vril, but not that they are unable to. Outside the novel, Bulwer-Lytton did, however, call the race a “different species” from humans, and state that mating between the two species would be impossible. He predicted the Vril-ya would ultimately “destroy” humanity.16

The Vril-ya undergo evolution as humans do, and Bulwer-Lytton’s discussion was clearly intended to explore human possibilities. His Vril-ya civilization can be compared easily with the aboveground world as a utopian—or dystopian—vision, since he questions the benevolence of this powerful and supposedly passionless race. The Vril-

14 1979 (1871) 36. The civilization is said to be run by females, who reach a height of seven feet, and are stronger than the males. However, males still manage the country, while females handle philosophical and technical duties. Bulwer-Lytton’s vision of dominant females goes only so far; they are said to become compliant to their husbands after marriage, though they take the initiative when it comes to romance.
15 Bulwer Lytton 2005 (1871), 49.
16 Cited in Seed 2005, xxiii.
ya’s religion revere a creator deity who cannot be named, except by qualities, such as the “the All-Good.” We are told that what distinguishes humans from animals is their ability to conceive of a deity. “Prayer and thanksgiving are…necessary to the complete development of the human creature.”

Vril-ya worship in short services conducted in a temple-like structure. Theological speculations are discouraged because they lead to conflict. The afterlife is expected to be “more felicitous and more perfect than the present.”

Bulwer-Lytton was anxious to preserve a deity, soul, and a spiritual purpose to life, strengthened by the human as middle link in the great chain of being. The religion takes a panentheist approach, which is hardly compatible with orthodox Christian thought. In the afterlife, souls pass into “new and improved forms, though not in this planet.” Each living thing (both plants and animals) retains a “sense of identity, so that it connects its past life with its future, and is conscious of its progressive improvement in the scale of joy.”

His vision reflected common spiritualist tenets—for example, that progress consists in striving for “superiority in moral conduct,” becoming more like “spirits beyond the grave.” Yet Bulwer-Lytton stopped short of making a firm declaration about that future life (and its bodies), other than to state that the transition to that world would be easier for those who had prepared themselves by extinguishing “avarice and ambition,” while those who had not done so would only pine for the world they had left.

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17 1979 (1871), 40.
18 1979 (1871), 41.
19 1979 (1871), 41.
20 1979 (1871), 58, 49.
21 1970 (1871), 50–51.
Morality and a Platonic view of the passions also enter into the discussion of vril. We are told that the passions are evil, and that Vril-ya society had been transformed several thousand years earlier when vril was discovered as an antidote to conflict, leading to the eradication of both war and passion. The modern Vril-ya live an ascetic lifestyle, though they are permitted to play games and engage in other pastimes, but not to consume either meat or intoxicating drinks. The Vril-ya appear to have achieved moral perfection—infidelity is unheard of, and divorce and polygamy are rare. The passionless perfection resembles Plato’s republic, with poetry and the arts in decline. In this law-free socialist utopia, inhabitants generally live to the age of one-hundred. The race’s longevity is said to be the result of “a serenity of mind undisturbed by anxious occupations and eager passions.”

Culture plays an important role in Bulwer-Lytton’s evolutionary vision. His Lamarckian-inflected evolutionary theory assumes that human evolution can take place much more rapidly than subsequent science revealed. Furthermore, that it could be influenced by culture and human effort, including spiritual practices. For example, we are told that the Vril-ya were formerly carnivorous but their carnivorous teeth had been modified by “hereditary transmission” so that they could not devour flesh. Lamarckian evolution is also clearly implied in the statement by one of the rulers of the underground kingdom, that: “we are all formed by custom—even the difference of our race from the savage is but the transmitted continuance of custom, which becomes, through hereditary descent, part and parcel of our nature.”

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22 1979 (1871), 60.
23 1979 (1871), 83.
24 1979 (1871), 87.
Bulwer-Lytton also used the theory of culture transforming nature to explain the alteration of the race after the discovery of vril. He described a marked change in the historical portraits of the Vril-ya, going back seven thousand years. Early exemplars of the race looked like modern Europeans, but more recent exemplars were not only beardless and red-skinned but more serene. This shift in appearance was said to have taken place “about a thousand years after the vril revolution.”

Thus the Vril-ya may be seen as prefiguring a possible human destiny. But they also suggest, as commentator Lillian Nayder has observed, “an odd composite of the very old and the very new, the imperial and the aboriginal”—more bidirectional “progress”!

The use and control of vril requires both “constitutional temperament, i.e., hereditarily transmitted organization” as well as practice. Vril-ya have a “visible nerve” going from the wrist up the base of the fore and middle fingers. This nerve developed in a Lamarckian manner, “slowly…in the course of generations, commencing in the early achievements, and increasing with the continuous exercise of the vril power.”

Here the narrative also directly addressed human possibility, telling us that “in the course of one or two thousand years, such a nerve may possibly be engendered in those higher beings of your race, who devote themselves to that paramount science through which is attained command over all the subtler forces of nature permeated by vril.” In other words, humans too can develop the capacity to use vril through a combination of effort and transmission of acquired characteristics.

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25 1979 (1871), 87.
26 2005, 217.
27 1979 (1871), 51–52.
28 1979 (1871), 54.
29 1979 (1871), 54.
This suggestion is the clearest expression of the novel’s vision. Humans can become like the Vril-ya through steady application of the “science” of subtle forces. They can obtain a nearly disease-free and long-lived body through controlling their passions and living an ascetic and disciplined lifestyle—part of the Hermetic and Rosicrucian narrative. And yet the preservation of the body is not the ultimate goal, as each individual can look forward to inhabiting future ethereal bodies. In the end, evolution is portrayed as simultaneously conscious and teleological.

Bulwer-Lytton concluded that humans could not live like Vril-ya, who would wipe them out when and if they did emerge from underground, a disturbing implication that resonated in future science fiction visions such as the X-Men franchise, as humans come to fear those with “supernormal” powers, to use Myers’s term. *The Coming Race* also incorporates troubling reflections on eugenics. The underground world becomes an evolutionary laboratory where, as one of the Vril-ya explains it, the race had been originally “driven…in order to perfect our condition and attain to the purest elimination of our species…when our education shall become finally completed, we are destined to return to the upper world, and supplant all the inferior races now existing therein.”

*The Origins of Root Race Theory in the Narrative of Latent Racial Talents*

Like the Vril-ya issuing forth from an underground cavern, Bulwer-Lytton’s evolutionary transformation of esoteric currents burst from the novelist’s pen to swell the growing stream of evolutionary theologies. Specifically, his contribution consisted of the conceptual blending that linked the following ideas: the notion that psychic powers are
developed as part of an evolutionary transformation, a specific connection of evolution with asceticism and Neoplatonism, and the idea that tribes or groups can “progress” evolutionarily at different rates. This would all prove especially appealing to Blavatsky as she developed root race theory.

But the rudiments of her theory had already been present in Isis in the following passage, at least: “Races of men differ in spiritual gifts as in color, stature, or any other external quality; among some peoples seership naturally prevails, among others mediumship. Some are addicted to sorcery, and transmit its secret rules of practice from generation to generation, with a range of psychical phenomena, more or less wide, as the result.”

These variations in talent, according to her, could also be seen in animal perception. In the following passage, she invoked animal talents, again with an arrow pointing backwards and forwards: “Every animal is more or less endowed with the faculty of perceiving, if not spirits, at least something which remains for the time being invisible to common men, and can only be discerned by a clairvoyant. We have made hundreds of experiments with cats, dogs, monkeys of various kinds, and, once, with a tame tiger.” She also described seeing a Hindu fakir who had “mesmerized” a round black mirror, which altered the behavior of animals. This fakir, exhibiting “white magic, was able to show “among other things, the fact that animals naturally possess the clairvoyant faculty, and even, it would seem, the ability to discern between the good and the bad spirits.”

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31 1960 (1877), 2:588.
32 1960 (1877), 1:467.
33 1960 (1877), 1:469.
Her discussion of the special powers of different ethnic groups came out in different contexts. She pointed out that individuals working in dye factories in Kashmir or in France might have the ability to perceive gradations of color that were invisible to others. In support, she cited the author Wendell Phillips who, in his book *Lost Arts*, had declared that “Oriental people have physical senses far more acute than the Europeans.” Blavatsky went on to comment on the ability of Kashmiri shawl makers to make and distinguish between colors that Europeans could not see: “If there is such a vast difference between the acuteness of the external senses of two races, why should there not be the same in their psychological powers?”  

Further, she argued:

[W]hy then, not concede, that some peculiarly-endowed organisms, which are thought to be possessed of that mysterious faculty called *second sight*, see their pictures as objectively as the [Kashmiri] girl sees the colors; and that therefore the former, instead of mere objective hallucinations called forth by imagination are, on the contrary, reflections of real things and persons impressed upon the astral ether…?  

The lens being applied by Blavatsky and Phillips here is a form of romantic Orientalism, which Edward Said characterizes as “a kind of second-order knowledge—lurking in such places as the ‘Oriental’ tale, the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability.” This romantic Orientalism was allied with European Romanticism, such as that of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. As Said describes it, they

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34 1960 (1877), 1:211. The narrative about color perception differing by race was probably initiated by Max Müller, but further research is needed to make this connection.

35 1960 (1877), 1:211–12.

36 2003 (1979), 52.
“urged upon their countrymen, and upon Europeans in general, a detailed study of India because, they said, it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture. And from this defeat would arise a new, revitalized Europe.” As we review Blavatsky’s ideas on race, it will become apparent that much of her valorization of the East arises from Romantic philosophy. But it may be argued that she also occasionally found herself outside this discourse when she argued for a true superiority of the East.

For example, Blavatsky went so far as to suggest a racial superiority on the part of at least Indians, Egyptians, and Tibetans over Caucasians when it came to the use of “magic,” i.e., the development of psychic powers:

Magic being what it is, the most difficult of all sciences to learn experimentally—its acquisition is practically beyond the reach of the majority of white-skinned people…. Civilized nations lack the phenomenal powers of endurance, both mental and physical, of the Easterns…. In the Hindu, the Arabian, the Thibetan, an intuitive perception of the possibilities of occult natural forces in subjection to human will, comes by inheritance; and in them, the physical senses as well as the spiritual are far more finely developed than in the Western races.

She lamented the “sense of superiority” of the “white European,” who contemptuously calls “niggers” the “Kopt, Brahman, or Lama” who might tutor him.

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37 2003 (1979), 115.
38 1960 (1877), 2:635–56.
Indeed, in her day “nigger” was used to describe all non-whites, including Egyptians, Indians, and Tibetans. She hoped that spiritualists were the Caucasians with the best chance of approaching the skill of the Easterners, since they are the “best prepared to appreciate occultism.” However, she warned spiritualists (ever an eye on that audience) that they undermined themselves by attributing occult phenomena to “the constant agency of disembodied human spirits.”³⁹ Blavatsky’s narrative of Asian and Middle Eastern superiority belies a simplistic racist reading of her root race theory, which was not fully elaborated until the 1880s, after she traveled to India.

In brief summary, root race theory builds on the idea that races are distinguished by talents. It incorporates seven “root races” of differently shaped and textured human bodies through which groups of souls “evolve” together by way of reincarnation. Each individual was seen as being required to incarnate and “progress” through seven “root races,” which also contained “sub-races.” Root races did not map onto human races, though some sub-races were associated with racial hierarchies. Before we delve into Blavatsky’s theory in detail and see how she connected it with her evolutionary vision, it is time to widen our lens and consider the scientific theories of race in the Victorian era in general, and in Darwin and Wallace specifically.

*Nineteenth-Century Perspectives on Race*

Darwin, T.H. Huxley, and Wallace, along with Blavatsky, Myers, and Sinnett, all subscribed to ideas of racial hierarchies that are racist by today’s standards. To be “racist” means to accept that any race is inherently superior or that race is the “primary

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³⁹ 1960 (1877), 2:636.
determinant of human traits and capacities.”

Robert Chambers had described in 1844 a progression of races from the “Negro” through the “Malay,” the “American,” the “Mongolian,” and the “Caucasian.” Such a hierarchy was taken as an established fact in nineteenth-century Victorian science, even among those who believed that all races were part of the same species. Although some religious thinkers resisted these trends, European involvement in the slave trade probably skewed towards the theory of racial hierarchies, which could be used to justify slavery.

In classical times, slaves came from all races and there was no attempt to create a hierarchy of enslaved peoples. However, in the European system of slavery, almost all slaves were black, and black skin became associated with “mental and moral inferiority,” writes Nancy Stepan in her widely cited 1982 history, The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800-1960. Stepan observes that the persistence of these ideas actually prevented scientists from absorbing new facts as they came along throughout almost the whole century from 1850 to 1950.

Stepan associates racism with the “return” or perhaps the revision of the great chain of being in the early nineteenth century. Between 1800 and 1850, racial “science” had shifted from “monogenism” to “polygenism.” Monogenism, as described by Stepan, held that “all the varieties of humankind…were…members of a single human, biological ‘species’ and united in a single brotherhood by their common humanity.”

Monogenist ideas were rooted in the writings of Saint Augustine and Christian theology, especially the notion that all humans were descended from Adam.

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42 1982, xii.
43 1982, 1.
The move towards polygenism accompanied a shift from focus on the fundamental “moral homogeneity of man” to “an emphasis on the essential heterogeneity of mankind…a shift from a sense of man as primarily a social being…to a sense of man as primarily a biological being, embedded in nature.” It also coincided with a move away from optimism about human nature towards “biological pessimism, and a belief in the unchangeability of racial ‘natures,’” Stepan writes.44 During the early nineteenth century, scientists had begun attempting to map the physical differences between human races, and the notion of an ascending scale of development was proposed, with reference to the great chain of being. Chambers even suggested that the “lower” races represented stages of “development in the highest or Caucasian type,” as a further refinement of the theory that the human embryo recapitulates the development of animal life.45

Two schools emerged, one associated primarily with James Cowles Prichard, who “embraced wholeheartedly the monogenist view” that came out of Linnaeus and others. Prichard, though monogenist, did participate in the “assumption of European superiority” and shared with other monogenists some of the “prejudices of their times,” observes Stepan.46 Nevertheless, he did not subscribe to the idea of fixed types and he was opposed to slavery on both Christian and moral grounds. Prichard’s monogenism was generally accepted until the 1840s. However, by the 1860s polygenism had gained strength, supported by views such as those of the anthropologist James Hunt, who declared the negro a “distinct type.”47 And, writes Stepan, “by the 1850s, the notion that the races formed a graded series, with the European at the top and the Negro invariably at

44 1982, 4.
45 1994 (1844), 306.
46 1982, 44.
47 1982, 3.
the bottom, had become one of the cornerstones of racial science.”

In the late 1850s, the Anthropological Society of London, founded by Hunt, began to promote the idea of the distinctness of races, focusing on physical differences and the supposed inability of distant races to cross.

However, many scientists, including Darwin, were uncomfortable with the new anthropological direction. “Darwin disagreed with its polygenism and with the position its members took on the various political and racial issues of the day…. Huxley wrote scathingly of Hunt’s comparison between the Negro and the ape, though…Huxley himself believed that the Negro was intrinsically inferior to the European,” Stepan writes. By the 1850s, the polygenist approach was ascendant in Britain, and the hierarchical scale was used to justify Europeans’ perceived greater achievement. Complicating matters were scientific studies measuring races according to brain size and facial angle, which concluded invariably that blacks were inferior to other races. Whether calculating biometric or cultural achievement, various “evidence” was marshalled to support racial hierarchies and polygenism.

Also supporting polygenism were linguistic theories. The Aryan hypothesis was based on the realization that Sanskrit was linguistically linked with European languages, which suggested common ancestors for Indians and Europeans. The hypothesis that an advanced northern Indian “Aryan” race had colonized Europe was first promoted by Friedrich Schlegel in 1819 and from there took root in European thought. The word Aryan is a Sanskrit word. But, according to Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Schlegel constructed its meaning based on the Greek Arioi, meaning Medes and Persians, and

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49 1982, 45.
linked it with *Ehre*, the German word for honor.\textsuperscript{50} Theories of Aryanism and a common Indo-European language family and race were still in their early stages in the 1840s, and did not begin to be linked by some with anti-Semitic theories until 1845.

Chambers, who probably influenced Blavatsky, had promoted a general theory of historical Aryan prominence in his 1844 *Vestiges*, identifying India as the probable “cradle of our [human] race.”\textsuperscript{51} Nevertheless, he also supposed that civilizations could rise and fall, and that there were times in the past when humans had been at more advanced stages of development than in the present. For example, attempting to harmonize myth and archaeology, he proposed that a simple sort of early “golden age” might have prevailed in India, followed by “degradation” and that the “varieties of mankind” could be accounted for by “so many advances and retrogressions in the developing power of human mothers.” Given that non-Caucasians made up the bulk of humanity, he concluded (conveniently for European superiority) that “the greater part of the human race must be considered as having lapsed or declined from the original type. But a “tendency to progress” had prevailed in the Caucasian or Indo-European family, where “the primitive organization” was “improved upon.”\textsuperscript{52} (We will see further correlations with Chambers when we review Blavatsky’s cyclic vision of progress.)

Chambers’s proposal was just one of a wide variety of systems based on the Aryan hypothesis that tended to support a racial hierarchy or even polygenism. The philologist and Indologist Max Müller (1823-1900) was a strong proponent of Aryan theories but the notion was common and was shared by T.H. Huxley. Not all whites were

\textsuperscript{50} 2002, 90.
\textsuperscript{51} 1994 (1844), 305.
\textsuperscript{52} 1994 (1844), 300, 305–9.
assumed to be Aryan. For example, it was speculated that Celts, particularly some Irish, were a declined race. Chambers wrote of the supposed retrogression of inhabitants of certain Irish counties, who over the period of merely a couple of centuries had begun to “exhibit peculiar features of the most repulsive kind, projecting jaws…depressed noses…and bow legs, together with an extremely diminutive stature…particularly seen in the Australian aborigines.”53 With such comparisons, writes Stepan, a religious anti-Irish prejudice was transformed “into an anthropological one.”54 As will be seen, the notions of the extreme rapidity with which races and species were imagined to transform, along with supposed racial hierarchies, would contribute to the esoteric evolutionisms of Blavatsky and, to a lesser extent, Myers.

**Natural Selection and Race**

What difference did Darwin make to the developing “science” of race? As today, the term *race* in the Victorian period was used in several senses—first, to describe a particular interbreeding group; secondly, a group with shared physical characteristics; thirdly, the entire population of humans. Darwin employed the term in several ways. On the one hand, he used it to refer to a species. In *Descent of Man*, describing all animals in general, and including, by implication, humans, he wrote that “natural selection…would lead to the formation of a new race less fertile, but better adapted for survival, than the parent race.”55 But he also used “race” in the sense of a group with shared physical characteristics, even while questioning the stability of any given racial category.

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53 1994 (1844), 280.  
54 1982, 100.  
55 2006 (1871), 962.
Darwin, who was himself an abolitionist, stated that all races were a single species but nevertheless lent support to racial hierarchies. His abolitionism was supported by his monogenist position—he insisted that humans, regardless of their physical differences, were a single species. As supporting evidence, he noted that nobody could agree on the number of races of humans, and that “the most weighty of all the arguments against treating the races of man as distinct species, is that they graduate into each other.”\textsuperscript{56} All races, he concluded, are descended from “a single primitive stock” and should be “classed under the same species.”\textsuperscript{57} Chambers also, though adhering to a racial hierarchy, had reached the same conclusion. He argued (citing Prichard), that it had been demonstrated that “the human race might have had one origin” and supporting the assumption that “the human race is one.”\textsuperscript{58}

Darwin also at times questioned hierarchical theories of race, writing, “the uniformity of savages has often been exaggerated, and in some cases can hardly be said to exist.”\textsuperscript{59} He supposed (as did Chambers) that skin color might be linked to climate. And he counted early Europeans as low in any racial ranking. He wrote, “in Europe the ancient races were all, according to Schaaffhausen, ‘lower in the scale than the rudest living savages.’”\textsuperscript{60}

Here, racial hierarchies are mixed with culture. And Darwin bought into a hierarchy based on civilization. He contributed to the scientific respectability of the idea, also expressed by Chambers, that “civilized” or higher races would eventually edge out

\textsuperscript{56} 2006 (1871), 905.
\textsuperscript{57} 2006 (1871), 907, 909.
\textsuperscript{58} 1994 (1844), 278, 294.
\textsuperscript{59} 2006 (1871), 842.
\textsuperscript{60} 2006 (1871), 911.
the more primitive. Darwin wrote that he anticipated that “the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.” The racial hierarchy served an important purpose in his arguments. For he predicted that just as the “savage” human races would one day be exterminated, so too would the great apes like gorillas, which would result in a wide gap between the lowest human, whether “negro or Australian,” and the lower apes. With this analogy, he sought to defend his theories in light of the gaps in the fossil record. The possibility of the extinguishment of races might explain the lack of missing transitional species between animal and human.

Darwin and other early evolutionists also, in order to defend natural selection and the notion of a branching evolutionary tree in light of missing evidence, pushed humans much closer to the animal kingdom than earlier thinkers. In his Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature, T.H. Huxley declared “the structural unity of man with the rest of the animal world, and more particularly and closely with the apes,” and that man was closer to the gorilla than was the gorilla to the “lower Apes.” Thus he emphasized, writes Stepan, “the smallness of the distance separating man from his nearest animal neighbors, the primates.”

In support of a hierarchical view of race, Huxley turned to skull shape. He famously juxtaposed oblong-headed ("dolichocephalic") Africans with protruding "prognathous" jaws against round-headed ("brachycephalic") and straight-jawed "orthognathous…Tartars and Calmucks," and singled out "pithecoid," i.e., monkey-like, Neanderthal skulls and the "flattened" skulls of native Australians as possible relations to
the missing link.\textsuperscript{64} (It is interesting to note the resonance between the nineteenth-century valorization of the round cranium and Plato’s association of a round head with the nobility of the human.) The great chain’s “principle of continuity” enjoyed a rebirth through the logic of linking “lower” humans and apes. As Stepan explains, “the argument for continuity led, almost inevitably, to the use of the lower races to fill the gap between animals and man. Later, scientists would find it only too easy to interpret Darwin as implying “that the races of man now formed an evolutionary scale.”\textsuperscript{65}

In short, Darwin, though an abolitionist and monogenist, was hardly modern in his views on race. Darwin was “pushed…in a racialist direction,” according to Stepan, by “the apparent reality of mental and moral racial differences.”\textsuperscript{66} His conclusions allowed polygenist ideas about racial hierarchies to propagate themselves in the scientific community. As Stepan explains, with Darwin’s theories in the mix, scientists soon found that “evolutionary thought was compatible with the idea of the fixity, antiquity, and hierarchy of human races.” Natural selection could support both monogenist and polygenist positions and, rather than eliminating polygenism, it “provided [the old racial ideas] with a new scientific vocabulary of struggle and survival.”\textsuperscript{67}

To give them some credit from a modern perspective, early evolutionary biologists were not univocal on the topic of race. Summarizing her conclusions about Darwin, Wallace, Lyell and Huxley, Stepan writes that what becomes clear is that “so many, and so difficult were the issues raised by evolution, that no single interpretation of the evolution of race emerged from the writings of the first evolutionists.” Their writings

\textsuperscript{64} 1863, 155–59.
\textsuperscript{65} 1982, 55.
\textsuperscript{66} 1982, 50.
\textsuperscript{67} 1982, 49.
are characterized by “doubts, disagreements and genuine perplexity.”  

Seemingly in support of the idea of fixed races was the tendency of races to continue to reproduce their ancestral skin color, regardless of their geographical location. “The failure of scientists to make a good case for the environmental causation of racial types strengthened the growing tendency in science to think in polygenist terms,” writes Stepan. The cause of variation in skin color was still unresolved as of the 1980s when Stepan wrote, though it had been suspected since the 1930s to be related to vitamin D synthesis and was later demonstrated to also be an adaptation to ultraviolet radiation.

Wallace actually changed his views on race, providing an example of how a Victorian thinker could be swayed by accumulating evidence. In 1864, he supported a theory of racial hierarchy, arguing in his first paper on human evolution that once the brain had produced intelligence, the struggle for existence had created a natural hierarchy, promoting the more capable and demoting the less capable, an idea that was picked up by Darwin. Wallace later altered his position, partly as a result of his spiritualist leanings. He concluded, as summarized by Stepan, that “mankind was originally brown in color, and that white skin was a selective response to a cool, damp climate.” Wallace also opposed the theory that the brains of Africans were smaller than those of Europeans, and he implied that all races had the same moral and spiritual potential. Like Chambers, he also questioned the idea that moral progress was steady and unidirectional. Europeans could just as easily degenerate as advance, Wallace argued.

After Darwin, it took some time for population-level theories about race and
genetics to develop, and eventually it was realized that linguistically related groups had been confused with biologically related, for example in the Aryan hypothesis. Stepan points out that the absence of genetic theories “for dealing with variation” made it “difficult to free oneself from typological ideas about race.” Thus scientists tended to pick and choose from among contradictory arguments when constructing theories about race. Ideas about hierarchies of cultural evolution, too, were hopelessly entangled in the mix.

Anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) promoted the idea of cultural evolution, which builds upon Spencer’s thought. Tylor proposed a natural progression from savagery to barbarism and civilization, which was based in racial hierarchy. He also believed that savage or primitive religion is animism, which eventually develops into the more complex forms of polytheism, which gives way to monotheism. Modern humans are superstitious and continue to believe in souls because of the “survivals” of primitive ideas among them. Lower races use magic, but magic survives in contemporary spiritualism. Blavatsky relied on Tylor’s progression of culture from savage to civilized, and also characterized indigenous tribes as “survivals” of earlier civilizations.

Blavatsky, sadly, used polygenism to support her theory of distinct root races but she also noted the scientific confusion on race. She wrote that scientists are “at sixes and sevens” on the question, and “agree to disagree.” However, she argued, “the majority of the Darwinian evolutionists incline to a polygenetic explanation of the origin of Races,”

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72 1982, 82.
74 1993 (1888), 2:168.
and cited Hunt in support. The scientific confusion does not, of course, excuse the cruel history of racism and the colonial policies supported by these biological theories, but at least it helps to explain how they could be marshalled to support a variety of objectives. For Blavatsky, the polygenetic approach allowed her to successfully harmonize her Hermetic and Kabbalistic proof texts with evolutionary theory, which was, as I argue, a primary goal of root race theory.

**The Mahatma Letters, Esoteric Buddhism, and Root Race Theory**

Blavatsky was both situated in and subversive of the racial concepts of her day. On the one hand, she joined the racist dialogue promoted by scientists and anthropologists. Her root race theory is inextricably linked with the nineteenth-century hierarchy of race from “savage” to “barbaric” to “civilized,” as well as the idea that existing aboriginal tribes were remnants of earlier “savage” races. But there is no direct mapping from a “root-race” to a physical race, and it is only the current fifth root-race that contains modern humans, who are divided into seven “sub-races” and further into forty-nine “branch-races.” These fifth-race sub- and branch-races do have a certain hierarchy, with “Aryans” at the top. Her incorporation of the language of “root” and “branch” suggests Darwinian evolution but also evokes a passage from Lévi: “According to the Kabbalists…the great Adam is represented by the tree of life, which extends above and below the earth by roots and branches; the trunk is humanity at large, the various races are the branches, and the innumerable individuals are the leaves.”

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75 1993 (1888), 2:169.
76 1897, 149.
As previously mentioned, root race theory projects a romantic filter onto Indian race and culture, in opposition to the general Victorian tendency adopted by the colonial occupiers and the missionaries who followed in their wake. While many Europeans denigrated Indians as irrational, passionate, impure, and idolatrous, Blavatsky elevated them. She was no doubt influenced in this course by Chambers and other supporters of the Aryan hypothesis, as well as spiritualists and Transcendentalists who had been looking to the East for wisdom since the early nineteenth century.

She opposed theories of racial difference that relied on skull thickness and declared the Indian the psychic equal of the European. She argued that even if the Southern Hindu might have a skull of different thickness than the European, the difference was “purely a climatic result, due to the intensity of the sun’s rays,” which “involves no psychological principles.” And contra narratives about the exclusivity of the white race, she also asserted that each soul was intended to inhabit all of the major races through an upward progress of reincarnation, a system that preserves a racial hierarchy but also would have been offensive to European Christians convinced of their unique status.

Scholars have debated whether or to what extent Blavatsky was racist but it seems clear that she was what we today would consider racist, regardless of revisionist attempts by later Theosophists. Progress through the root races entailed incarnation in successively more advanced, pure, and ethereal forms, which led in a hierarchy from aboriginal Australian and African to Indian and “Aryan.” She declared some existing

77 See Brown 2012, 69–78.
78 See Versluis 1993.
79 1960 (1877), 2:636.
80 For a range of positions on the topic, see Santucci 2008, Lubelsky 2013, Crow 2017, 85–137.
primitive tribes to be remnants of earlier, less advanced races. Blavatsky’s ideas were later used to promote fascist and neo-Nazi views but they were also adapted by later generations of Theosophists to soften or eliminate racist teachings, in order to harmonize the teachings with shifting social mores. Blavatsky was not attached to a particular political ideology. Her ideas were used after her death by Theosophists to support progressive causes such as Indian self-determination, even as they would also be marshalled by nativist groups.

Root race theory, while it may have been present in a rudimentary form in Blavatsky’s earliest work, developed into its mature form during her stay in India. She and Olcott had travelled there in 1879 after being contacted by Indians interested in the ideals of the Theosophical Society, the members of the Hindu reformist group Arya Samaj. Before their journey, considering a proposed merger with the Arya Samaj, they had begun to revise their organization’s official objectives, and added as one of the “objects” to “aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity…of every race.” By 1886, they refined this objective to read, “To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed or colour.” Although the implementation of this goal may have varied over time, it was nearly revolutionary in

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81 For more on fascist groups that used Theosophical ideas, see Goodrick-Clarke 2002, 79–87. Blavatsky was also specifically accused of anti-Semitism. These charges are based in part on her delegitimization of the Hebrew Bible, which she like many others in the nineteenth century attacked on a historical-critical basis. In addition, her fondness for gnostic and Kabbalistic doctrines led her to ridicule and question the Old Testament God Yahweh as an evil demiurge. As Trompf notes, Blavatsky’s position took on “a problematic pro-Indo-European, anti-Jewish face…that would make her macrohistorical exercises vulnerable to later twists by Nazi and ‘right-wing’ esotericists” (1998, 285). Her sympathy for Jewish mysticism notwithstanding, she did not consider Jews to be Aryans, but stated in Isis the opinion of some historians that they were identical to “Phœnecians,” and followed up with her own assertion that “Phœnecians were beyond any doubt an Æthiopian race.” However, she also singled out other groups as non-Aryan—for example, she stated: “the present race of Punjaub [a region in northwest India] are hybridized with the Asiatic Æthiopians” (1960 [1877], 1:567).

82 Ransom 1938, 546, 548.
Victorian India.

Root-race theory is a syncretic system, even though it took its final form during Blavatsky’s Indian period. As I will argue, important components were present before she and Olcott landed in Bombay. However, Blavatsky presented root-race theory as an Eastern doctrine, and it gives a prominent place to Eastern terms such as *karma* and *atma*, although, as shown above, Hindu and Buddhist terms were also present in *Isis*. One new major post-*Isis* development was Blavatsky’s open endorsement of reincarnation in 1882, which led to charges of inconsistency, given that in *Isis* she had confusingly denied reincarnation or stated it to be rare, and had not explicitly incorporated it into her system of evolution. The place of reincarnation in Blavatsky’s thought will be reviewed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

The system that came to be called root race theory first emerged out of Blavatsky’s discussions in India with the English writer and newspaper editor Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921). In response to a series of questions posed by Sinnett, who was at the time editor of the *Pioneer*, the most prominent English-language daily in India, a correspondence developed called the Mahatma letters, whose origins, discussed in greater detail below, are disputed. These letters were given to Sinnett between 1880 and 1884, but not eventually published until 1923 as *The Mahatma Letters*, edited by A.T. Barker. The doctrines in the letters first became available to the public in 1883 when Sinnett published a book called *Esoteric Buddhism*, his attempt at explaining Theosophical doctrines.

The letters can be seen as a post-*Isis* development of Blavatsky’s evolutionary theories. It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate their authorship, which has been
discussed extensively elsewhere. The letters are signed by individuals claiming to be Blavatsky’s Eastern teachers, or adepts, also known as Mahatmas (a traditional Sanskrit word meaning “Great Soul”) but they are written in a style very close to Blavatsky’s, although in a different handwriting. They do occasionally chide her and display other evidence of independent personalities.

The letters, most of which were signed in the name of an adept known as K.H., or Koot-Hoomi, address concerns that were relevant to Blavatsky and her movement. They continue themes from Isis, though Gauri Viswanathan also detects the concerns of the colonized Indian bureaucrat moving towards secularization. The Mahatmas are as interested in Western religion as in Eastern scripture, often quoting the Bible. The following passage from a Mahatma letter describes evolution as a divine force and resonates with the Isis narrative: “Law the Universal great fashioner is termed ‘God’ by Christians and Jews, and understood as Evolution by Kabalists.”

From a sociology of knowledge and rhetorical standpoint, the new system can be seen as a reflection both of Blavatsky’s ongoing battle to reform spiritualism and her equally strong goal of using Indian culture and religion to legitimate her work. One of the primary theological innovations of the letters is the expansion from a three-part to a seven-part anthropology, which becomes central to root race theory. A primary theological outcome of the division of the human into seven parts was to add new complexity to the medium-messenger argument from Isis. Where Isis had delegitimized the productions of mediums as communication with decaying souls, the Mahatmas’

84 See Viswanathan 2000.
85 Letter 13, in Barker ed. 1975, 76.
septenary system could explain them as products of the “astral” and “animal” soul.

The second theological outcome of the septenary human is to effectively preserve an individual personality through reincarnation without granting to the body, mind, or emotions any permanent nature. The Hindu and Buddhist terms that Blavatsky’s Mahatmas adopted were those that would best harmonize with and support the most anti-matter and anti-body aspects of the contradictory Hermetic and Neoplatonic attitudes. At least some of Blavatsky’s Indian interlocutors, who can be assumed to have influenced the development of these doctrines, represented an Advaita Vedanta perspective, a traditional Indian form of nondualism with strong idealist tendencies. C. Mackenzie Brown describes her system as having “assimilated various Western evolutionary views of her day into a modified Advaitic framework.”

One of Blavatsky’s chief influences at this time was the founder of the Arya Samaj, Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, who promoted Vedic fundamentalism. This meant in practice that his group focused on the Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas (which are agreed by scholars today to be the oldest of the Hindu scriptures). Sarasvati’s central focus was on the Vedas as both infallible and primary, though he also sought to reform the excesses of Brahmanism—for example, the caste system. Sarasvati was strongly opposed to the cultivation of psychic talents and “miracle working,” and Blavatsky’s contact with him created pressure to reduce emphasis on the organization’s earlier goal of the investigation of psychic powers. Blavatsky eventually fell out with the Arya Samaj, partly over her and Olcott’s promotion of Buddhism. But she continued to discourage

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86 2012, 133.
87 See Ransom 1938, 117. The Mahatma Letters can hardly be said to accurately depict Buddhist theology, opposing as they do “atheistic” Buddhism, and asserting the survival of personal identity after nirvana (Barker ed. 1975, Letter 9, 43–4; Letter 23b, 171).
and de-emphasize the powers and talents that she had earlier pledged to investigate.

Nevertheless, these powers continued to play a role in Blavatsky’s salvation scheme, as will become clear when we investigate more closely the Mahatma letters and their seven-part anthropology.

The seven-part model was introduced to the public in 1881, in an article in *The Theosophist* by A.O. Hume, another Englishman living in India, to whom some of the Mahatma letters had been addressed. The principles of the “septenary soul,” as summarized by Sinnett, are: (1) the body, *rupa* (2) vitality, *prāna*, or *jīva* (3) astral body, *linga śarira*, (4) animal soul, *kāma rupa* (5) human soul, *manas* (6) spiritual soul, *buddhi*, and (7) spirit, *ātmā*. These are all traditional Sanskrit categories, widely available in Hindu and Buddhist literature. But Blavatsky gave them her own spin. According to the new system, the second through fourth principles perish with the body or decay in an “astral” realm. The revelations of spiritualists come from shells, which are the decaying remnant of the “fourth” principle, the animal soul, combined with unfulfilled wishes and desires of the fifth (human soul). The fifth, sixth, and seventh principles survive death and reincarnate, while the sixth and the seventh are the vehicles for soul evolution and divinization.

In a new definition of salvation, the letters state that the goal of life on earth is for the individual to “assimilate to itself the eternal life-power residing but in the seventh [principle] and then blend the three (fourth, fifth and seventh) into one—the sixth. Those who succeed in doing so become Buddhas, dyan Chohans, etc.” The letter states that the

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88 Sinnett 2008 (1883), 22.
89 Sinnett 2008 (1883), 89–94.
living Mahatma K.H., who is presented not as a disembodied spirit but as a living human, is “on his way to the goal.” This development becomes central to the Theosophical vision of human divinization, i.e., salvation, as discussed below and in chapter 6.

The new system of evolution in the *Mahatma Letters* incorporated both an endless series of reincarnations and very long time frames, even longer than Lyell’s geological eras, borrowing from Hindu mythology the “yugs,” or “yugas”—a system of “cycles” lasting hundreds of billions of years. It adopted the Hindu idea that everything in the universe is created and destroyed during a single breath of Brahman. This is a highly impersonal process, making creation and destruction ultimately unrelated to human action. Each in-breath and out-breath is said to be a Manvantara, which has seven periods, extending throughout a “Maha-Kalpa,” making a total of 311,040 billion years.

Various Indic systems, from bhakti to tantric traditions, provide a way out or shortcut through this deterministic system. Blavatsky, in a Western attempt at putting some sort of human scale on the chronology, argued that Manvantaras and Kalpas have both a macro and micro sense. “The scholar who studies the Hindu religion…must not take literally…the statements therein found…. So, for instance, these periods relate in the same language to both the great and the small periods.”

In the process of incorporating these long time frames, the system also extends

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91 Barker, ed. 1975, Letter 13, 78.
92 1993 (1888), 1:369. Blavatsky was certainly not the first Westerner to try to counter the fatalistic aspects of Eastern theology with a dose of Western progress. For example, Hardinge Britten’s *Art Magic,* published the year before *Isis Unveiled,* includes a section on Indian religion and “magic,” which praises the ascetic practices of Hindu and Buddhist monks yet also questions the “invincible [sic] tendency of the Hindoo mind to regard the scheme of being as fixed and unchangeable, and the belief in “Yugs,” or cycles of time, through which mankind must inevitably pass, in the fulfillment of a destiny as immutable as the Will of Deity, have paralyzed all effort at advancement” (2011, 183). Hardinge Britten’s work reveals the tensions that resulted from the attempt to blend East and West, and laid the groundwork for Blavatsky’s more influential synthesis.
human evolution from earth to other planets. Recalling the arc-shaped “chain” described in *Isis*, Blavatsky tells us that souls are engaged in a process of densification and etherealization through a U-shaped series of seven planets, several of which are invisible to us, being more spiritual. Each root race spends a given amount of time on each planet. Its souls incarnate in various “sub-races” until the planet itself is either etherealized or densified, and the souls move on to the next stage in the chain. Blavatsky had foreshadowed this idea in *Isis* with her question as to whether planets might not also have a continued after-death existence, “like man…in a sublimated, ethereal, or spiritual form.”

Julie Hall has performed an in-depth evaluation of the Mahatmas (and Blavatsky’s) seven-part anthropology (often called the *saptaparna*, or seven-leaved plant). Hall views it as a syncretistic system that combines elements of Western esotericism from Kabbalah, Neoplatonism, Westernized Egyptology, and Paracelsus with Eastern sources. Although Blavatsky used Sanskrit terms to describe the seven-part soul, she admitted in *The Secret Doctrine* that there were different anthropologies in Eastern texts and that none had seven parts. Hall concludes: “Although the Theosophical system is not identical to the Vedantic, we can see that the names of Blavatsky’s principles are all accounted for in Vedānta philosophy, although their arrangement and understanding differs. In both cases, she arranges them in such a way as to harmonize them with her septenary schemata.”

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93 1960 (1877), 1:255. As we have seen, in the nineteenth century Western esotericism already incorporated the idea of other inhabited planets. Swedenborg has been identified as an obvious source. According to Trompf, Swedenborg “claimed to ‘see’ peoples on four ‘Earths’ before ours,” in his *The Earths in the Universe* (1998, 282).
94 Cited in Hall 2007, 19.
95 2007, 20. According to Hall, the septenary schema also relies on a lecture by a British spiritualist named Gerald Massey entitled *The Seven Souls of Man* (see Hall 2007, 22), who attempted to harmonize various
Blavatsky’s sources are, as usual, eclectic. She had an 1840 translation of the Vishnu Purana by Horace Hayman Wilson, which was one of the earliest Hindu texts to be made available in English. She also relied on a work entitled Buddhism in Tibet by Emil Schlagintweit, published in 1863. According to historian of Buddhism Donald Lopez, Schlagintweit’s book contains “a wealth of largely accurate information about Tibetan Buddhism.”

Goodrick-Clarke has identified other books on Tibet upon which Blavatsky could also have relied. And she incorporated the views of other Western authors who had already attempted a synthesis of East and West, such as Lévi, Jacolliot, and Hardinge-Britten. According to Garry Trompf, some of Blavatsky’s “cyclic evolutionism” came from Jacolliot, who believed that Christianity and Kabbalah originated in India.

The essential teachings of Secret Doctrine and the Mahatma Letters were neither all Western esoteric nor all Eastern, but an imaginative synthesis.

Before taking on the complexities of Blavatsky’s theory, we will review Sinnett’s simplified version, which probably penetrated most deeply into Victorian intellectual culture. In Esoteric Buddhism, Sinnett attempted to spell out the system of the Mahatma

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Further views on their syncretic construction are as follows. The philologist Max Mueller attacked Esoteric Buddhism in 1893 for its inaccurate portrayal of Indian religion. French suggests that rather than a cultural exporter of Eastern ideas into Europe, as Blavatsky claimed, she in fact “imported” standard motifs of Western esotericism into India and speedily arrayed them in local forms, thus fashioning an Indicised esotericism. Lavoie observed that according to an evaluation of the Mahatma letters by Harold and William Hare conducted in the 1930s, Blavatsky had quoted from an 1871 translation of a Buddhist text by Samuel Beal but inserted her own terms, including “Arahas,” “Dhyān Chohans,” and “Devachan,” thus giving these terms, as Lavoie describes it, “authority and textual precedence” (2012, 195).
letters, although he and Blavatsky would later fall out over differences of interpretation. His 1883 *Esoteric Buddhism* was widely read in the English-speaking world and accepted as a revelation of actual Buddhist doctrines for at least a decade.

In Sinnett’s interpretation, root race theory incorporates Darwinian natural selection as a slice of the grander story of soul evolution. In a preface to a later edition, Sinnett wrote:

[T]he central statement now put forward constitutes a theory of anthropology which completes and spiritualizes the ordinary notions of physical evolution. The theory which traces man’s development by successive and very gradual improvements in animal *forms* from generation to generation, is a very barren and miserable theory…but properly understood it paves the way for a comprehension of the higher concurrent process which is all the while evolving the soul of man in the spiritual realm of existence.\(^{100}\)

Sinnett paid lip service to the idea of natural selection in his 1918 preface to *Esoteric Buddhism*, where he described the “evolution of the soul” as follows:

We find the soul as an entity emerging from the animal kingdom, and passing into the earliest human forms, without being at that time ripe for the higher intellectual life….But through successive incarnations in forms whose physical improvement, under the Darwinian law, is constantly fitting them to be its habitation at each return to objective life, it gradually gathers that

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\(^{100}\) Sinnett 2008, xiv, preface to the 1918 edition.
enormous range of experience which is summed up in its higher
development.\textsuperscript{101}

As Sinnett describes it, the system sounds like a simple extension of Chambers, Wallace, and other progressive ideas of human development. It also references the
Hermetic notion that the soul needs the body in order to gain experience. What makes it, even in Sinnett’s version, unwieldy and complex is its attempt to link four series of
sevens in gradations from “material” to “ethereal” and “intellectual” to “spiritual.” The
seven-part human, which begins at flesh and ends at spirit, is linked with three U-shaped
curves—(1) seven “rounds,” or successions through (2) seven planets, which begin in
spirit, descend to matter, then return to spirit, and (3) seven “races” on each planet, each
of which is associated with one or more types of bodies, which range from ethereal to
material and back again. Each “race” has some correlation with the components of the
septenary soul, though this correlation is not exact since the components of the soul are
organized in a linear and not U-shaped series.\textsuperscript{102}

Sinnett portrayed human destiny as a “methodical” process through a “system of
worlds,” a “circuit round which all individual spiritual entities have alike to pass; and that

\textsuperscript{101} 2008, xv.
\textsuperscript{102} See Sinnett (2008 [1883], 51) for a connection of rounds and principles. Most scholars of Theosophy
think that the choice of the number seven as a mediator in these schemes is drawn from Western esoteric
sources, including Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, Böhme, and Paracelsus, though Indian theology played a role
in its conceptualization (See Hall 2007). Blavatsky tried to defend the universality of her system, pointing
out that the number seven was used at times in Hindu mythology. There are indeed seven Rishis, or
secondary creators, in one of Blavatsky’s sources, the Vishnu Purana, which may have suggested a parallel
to Blavatsky with the seven demiurges of the Hermetic creation story (see H. H. Wilson 1961 [1840], 22,
218). In addition, the Vishnu Purana, in Wilson’s translation, describes an original cosmic egg “externally
invested by seven natural envelopes, or by water, air, fire, ether, and Ahankára the origin of the
elements…next came the principle of Intelligence; and, finally, the whole was surrounded by the indiscrete
Principle; resembling thus the cocoa-nut” (1961 [1840], 18).
passage constitutes the Evolution of Man." Each individual is said to require seven incarnations within each of 49 sub-races, somehow resulting in 777 incarnations (111 times 7) on each globe, with time spent between lives in an intermediate location known as Devachan, to reflect on lessons learned. At the end of this very long and deterministic process, even a progression through all seven rounds, globes, and races is not enough for liberation, but simply deposits the soul at the next level of a cyclic evolutionary process.

"[I]f we compare the system of worlds to a system of towers standing on a plane,... the spiritual monad performs a spiral progress round and round the series, passing through each tower, every time it comes round to it, at a higher level than before." A “round” can commence only when all souls from the previous round have completed the circuit.

Sinnett’s attitudes towards race, like Blavatsky’s, were embedded in nineteenth-century principles of racial hierarchy. He described the individual as incarnating in “successive races of men before it passes onward, and it even has many incarnations in each great race.” This evolutionary progress through the races could “account” for, Sinnett wrote, paraphrasing a Mahatma letter, “those immense differences of intellect and morality, and even of welfare in its highest sense, which generally appear so painfully mysterious.”

The root race system involved an extensive elaboration of the Isis depiction of human destiny, with the “lost” continents of Atlantis and Lemuria now being correlated with races and fatalistic race-ending cataclysms. The long time frame of the “rounds” lends the entire system a deterministic cast, as does the prediction of continent-destroying...
cataclysm. It also performed the cultural work of situating humans in what Trompf calls *macrohistory*, “the mental location of more and more individuals and groups in a newly conceived enormousness of geographical breadth and (linear-)temporal depth.”

In terms of the chronology of these evolutionary developments, the Mahatma letters try to sync up geological time with the vast time scales from the Hindu mythology, not always in a coherent fashion. The letters place the nineteenth-century earth in the fourth round of the sequence, and the early sub-races of the fifth root race, the first race to exhibit characteristics of modern humans. According to Sinnett, the evolution of the fifth race “began about a million years ago.”

This temporal scheme also situates modern historical time in a position on the evolutionary time scale in which the spiritual is said to be regaining ascendancy over the intellect and the physical form is destined to once again become more etherealized. Thus, conveniently for a religious system, modern humans are located at an evolutionary crux with the intellect in retreat and spiritual gnosis ascendant, which becomes the basis for soteriology.

In spite of its fatalistic cast, the system does make room for free will and individual effort, which remained one of Blavatsky’s core aims. The Mahatma letters do so by presenting the possibility of individuals speeding up or slowing down their own evolution through the rounds, races, and sub-races. They describe “laggard” races, those who got off the evolutionary train at some point, as well as advanced souls who have

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108 Barker, ed. 1975, 83.
109 2008 (1883), 52. Later generations of Theosophists and others influenced by its teachings would develop a new urgency to advance through the rounds, predicting that members of the sixth sub-race were already beginning to incarnate, and finally dropping the sub-races entirely to focus on the coming “seventh,” or most spiritual, race.
“skipped” a round. Citing the Mahatmas, Sinnett stated that humans “may individually exercise the free will they unquestionably possess” although the races are “controlled collectively by the cyclic law.”

Foremost among the advancing souls who provide hope in the evolutionary scheme are the adepts and Mahatmas themselves, a key component of the Theosophical salvation scheme, and one of Blavatsky’s major innovations in the esoteric tradition, as pointed out by Goodrick-Clarke.  

In his dissertation “The Theosophical Masters,” Brendan French, a student of Trompf, argued that the figure of the master or adept is the pivot point of Blavatsky’s mature soteriology, which it holds out as a goal that all can hope to attain. The letters describe advanced souls such as Plato and Confucius as “avant couriers” and “fifth round men” in advance of the fourth rounders presently incarnated. Jesus, “our Lord,” is “a sixth round man.” (The way Sinnett—and the Mahatmas—toss around the terms “fourth-round” and “sixth-round man,” it sounds as if they are referring to brilliant pupils in the British secondary-school system, who advance from the fourth form directly to the sixth, etc.) It is in these letters, then, that Theosophy first presented the concept of the

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110 2008 (1883), 65.
111 2010, 115. K. Paul Johnson, in The Masters Revealed (1994), has argued that the Mahatmas are fictionalized portrayals of real individuals with whom Blavatsky and Olcott interacted, though he also stated that more research is needed. However, French (2000, 1:7–16) and others suggest that while Indian interlocutors no doubt played a role in the developing Eastern emphasis of Theosophy, no single individual should be identified as a Mahatma, since their teachings reflect multiple sources and a creative process that has not yet been fully evaluated. It is certainly possible that Blavatsky wrote most of the letters while in a trance and using the handwriting of an alternate personality. Vernon Harrison, a forgery expert and psychical researcher, speculated that if Blavatsky had produced the bulk of the letters, that the authors KH and M may have been “sub-personalities of Helena Blavatsky.” However, pointing out that “there are KH letters which even Hodgson had to admit Madame Blavatsky could not possibly have written as she was too far away at the time and communications were bad” (1997, 68), he speculated that she either had an assistant or exhibited supernormal powers. It is not clear whether Mahatma letters were transmitted to Sinnett via the shrine into which the Coulombs alleged they had installed a false door, and which was later burned in a suspicious fire at the Theosophical headquarters (making it a subject of international ridicule), but if it was, it was not the only means by which these letters were transmitted.

112 French 2000.
113 Barker, ed. 1975, Letter 14, 84.
“evolved” master as divinized human, which became crucial to later Theosophy, though “adepts” had certainly been discussed in *Isis*.

Importantly for our story, Sinnett also described the psychic talent as a hallmark or signifier of the advanced soul, and emphasized the importance of cultivating both spirituality and psychic talents, although he did introduce caveats. He painted a picture of future humans similar to Vril-ya, who value spiritual qualities over the intellectual, develop more refined senses than present-day humans, and ultimately attain godlike perfection by the sixth round:

> In the sixth round humanity attains a degree of perfection both of body and soul, of intellect and spirituality, which ordinary mortals of the present epoch will not readily realize in their imaginations. The most supreme combinations of wisdom, goodness, and transcendental enlightenment which the world has ever seen or thought of, will represent the ordinary type of manhood. Those faculties which now, in the rare efflorescence of a generation, enable some extraordinarily gifted persons to explore the mysteries of Nature…will then be the common appanage [natural accompaniment] of all.¹¹⁴

> Sinnett predicted that during the “seventh round…Mankind will be something altogether too godlike for mankind in the fourth round to forecast its attributes.”¹¹⁵ In talking about these advanced souls, adepts, and Mahatmas, Sinnett built on the “crowning race” and Vril-ya metaphors, invoking the “appointed evolution of humanity to the higher

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¹¹⁴ 2008 (1883), 124.
¹¹⁵ 2008 (1883), 124.
forms of existence which crown the edifice [of life].”

He also gave the “spiritual” primacy in a conflict between intellect and spirit, and linked the salvation scheme with intuition and the development of spiritual talents. In the Theosophical scheme, Plato’s “rational” soul has become the spiritual, and the intellect has been downgraded.

Sinnett linked “spirituality” with “intuition” by way of the following argument, beginning by declaring that “spirituality” is not about “feeling devout” but about “assimilating knowledge at the fountainhead of knowledge itself.” He lamented the tendency of “Western speculation to depreciate spirituality” and proposed that this happens because Western philosophy “has not been made acquainted with the range of inner faculties of man,” such as intuition. “The process of working with it [intuition] is occult science in its highest aspect, the cultivation of spirituality.”

But Sinnett did incorporate some of Blavatsky’s by now growing caution about mediumistic talents. He described the abuse of such talents on the mythical continent Atlantis, a topic on which Blavatsky would elaborate, and warned that there are lower and higher aspects to their cultivation. Indicating a general support for Dayanand Sarasvati’s contempt for miracle working, Sinnett described the ability to control “physical results” as the “lowest aspect” of occult science. Adopting a cautionary tone, he described a “progress towards absolute evil” that:

sets in with the acquisition…of those powers over Nature which accrue even now in adeptship from the premature development of higher faculties than those we ordinarily employ…. It is enough to say that they are such as cannot

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116 2008 (1883), 133.  
117 2008 (1883), 135.  
118 2008 (1883), 137.
but be dangerous to society generally, and provocative of all manner of

crimes which would utterly defy detection, if possessed by persons capable of

regarding them as anything else but a profoundly sacred trust.\textsuperscript{119}

But in spite of the occasional warning surrounding the development of psychic talents or

producing phenomena, the Mahatma letters continued the narratives of \textit{Isis} about such
talents, confirming that they proved the progression of an “adept” towards perfection, as

argued in letter fifteen:

Fathom the nature and essence of the sixth principle [Buddhic or spiritual

soul] of the universe and you will have fathomed the greatest mystery in this

our world—and why not—are you not surrounded by it? What are its familiar

manifestations, mesmerism, Od force, etc.—all different aspects of one force

capable of good and evil applications. The degrees of an Adept’s initiation

mark the seven stages at which he discovers the secret of the sevenfold

principles in nature and man and awakens his dormant powers.\textsuperscript{120}

Sinnett elaborated on the development of these talents, which continued in the Mahatma

letters to be associated with the phenomena-as-law argument. The process of progress

under the “adepts,” wrote Sinnett, works through cultivation of “spiritual perceptiveness”

and “clairvoyant vision” and permits the “chela” to see the “whole scheme of evolution,”

which appears in pictures rather than being communicated by words. Years later, after

Blavatsky’s death, Sinnett would undertake his own exploration of clairvoyant talents and

\textsuperscript{119} 2008 (1883), 64.

\textsuperscript{120} Barker, ed. 1975, Letter 15, 99.
begin to “channel” new Mahatma letters himself.\textsuperscript{121}

So successful was Sinnett’s presentation of the adept as forerunner of evolution, as avant-courier, as round-skipper, that the Theosophical Society began to attract individuals asking to be taken up by the masters as initiates. Back in London, Sinnett formed an advanced study group. The trope of evolutionarily advanced soul had begun to take root. This trope would reverberate through esoteric circles and certainly influence later mutant and science fiction mythologies.

Sinnett’s work was broadly influential in Victorian Britain, and his work fertilized the soil being tilled by Myers, as discussed in chapter 7. The components of Sinnett’s evolutionism as of \textit{Esoteric Buddhism} in 1883 are summarized below, and will be further evaluated for their conceptual blending in chapter 8. Blavatsky, however, was unhappy with aspects of Sinnett’s latest book, and had already begun to prepare the \textit{Secret Doctrine} in order to clarify and correct him, thereby establishing herself as the preeminent authority on root races, rounds, and spiritual evolution.\textsuperscript{122} Her mature evolutionary system is explored in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{121} See French 2000, 138n10. Sinnett later concluded in his 1922 book \textit{The Early Days of Theosophy in Europe} that the letters were not “in the beginning what I imagined them to be—letters actually written by the Master and then forwarded by occult means either to Madame Blavatsky or deposited somewhere about the house where I should find them. They were certainly inspired by K.H…but for the most part, if not always, were dictations to a competent clairaudient amanuensis and Madame Blavatsky was generally the amanuensis in question.” Sinnett complained that Blavatsky “seems to have been possessed with the belief that she could improve on and expand the Masters’ communications” and that her “improvements…were almost disastrous.” He reported that the master K.H. had told him that some passages “are a travesty of his meaning” but that the material on karma, reincarnation, “the planetary chains, the succession of the root races…were not tampered with” (French 2000, 138n10, citing Sinnett, \textit{The Early Days}, 27–28).

\textsuperscript{122} There are significant differences in emphasis and even theology between \textit{Esoteric Buddhism} and \textit{The Mahatma Letters} (viewed as a mostly cohesive unit) and the 1888 \textit{The Secret Doctrine}, most importantly that of the question of permanent annihilation. While the letters had stated directly that “laggard egos,” souls who clung to matter and rejected spirit, might be annihilated en masse, and their psychic energy recycled, using chillingly the Darwinian language of “survival of the fittest,” (Barker, ed. 1975, Letter 9, 47), this concept was rejected in \textit{The Secret Doctrine}. See also Lavoie 2012, 203.
### Table 14: Evolution in Sinnett and the Mahatma Letters C. 1883

1. Seven-part anthropology.
2. Salvation consists of synthesizing higher aspects of the individual with the “life power.”
3. All life is engaged in an inevitable densification and etherealization process.
4. Souls inhabit bodies evolved from animals by Darwinian law.
5. Physical evolution is part of a “higher concurrent process” of soul evolution.
6. Evolution is a cyclic progress through seven rounds, seven root races, and seven planets.
7. Humans will reincarnate hundreds of times, moving through race and sub-race.
8. Free will is preserved through the possibility of advance by skipping rounds.
9. Advance is “achieved” by elevating the “spiritual” and intuitive over the intellectual.
10. Future humans (sixth round) will be more ethereal and commonly possess power over natural forces.
11. Humans who become adepts or masters demonstrate the possibilities for all.
Chapter 6: Unmanageable Visions in Root Race Theory—Giant Red Apes and Hermaphrodites

Thus the earlier teachings, however unsatisfactory, vague and fragmentary, did not teach the evolution of “man” from the “ape.” …The man who preceded the Fourth, the Atlantean Race, however much he may have looked physically like a ‘gigantic ape’…was still a thinking and already a speaking man.

—Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*. 1

Root race theory represents the most developed version of Blavatsky’s double evolution, but also the most bizarre elements—particularly about gender and reproduction—which tended to be dropped in later systems such as Myers’s and those that contributed to Roszak’s composite model. Before we undertake a detailed evaluation of the conceptual blending used in the construction of this system (chapter 8), we will here break it down into its elements. My basic proposal is that root race theory takes its infrastructure from Hermetic myth, and it rallies Eastern and scientific concepts to its support only when they seem to confirm or overdetermine it.

Root race theory is fully elaborated in *The Secret Doctrine*, an unwieldy work that was pasted together by some of Blavatsky’s London followers out of thousands of pages of her notes. It was originally slated to fill three volumes, of which only two were

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1 1993 (1888), 1:191.
published during her lifetime. Many of the remaining notes were destroyed, while others found their way into additional posthumous publications. In his history of the Theosophical movement, Campbell calls *The Secret Doctrine*, “a, perhaps *the*, major work of occultism in the last [nineteenth] century,” and argues that its greatness rests upon its situation of Asian religions within an answer to science and its ability to give meaning to “individual destiny….and…significance to individual suffering,” along with “hope for salvation.”

*The Secret Doctrine* elaborates on the *Mahatma Letters* with a grand scheme of evolution in which the body of flesh is gradually superseded by one of spirit, as the earth itself is also progressively transformed into a more refined but still substantial dwelling place for the species. As noted, there are seven root races in Blavatsky’s system, which do not parallel the human races. Each soul is destined almost mechanically to pass through each race, and a race at any given time is made up of individuals, or “monads,” who are destined to undergo transformation together, and to pass through a variety of bodies with differing characteristics as they become progressively more material, then spiritual.

According to *Secret Doctrine*, modern humans are members of a fifth “root race,” biologically descended from the giants that Blavatsky had called in *Isis* the “fourth race.” The ungendered, hermaphroditic, and gendered nature of the bodies of earlier races and the gradual nature of their transformation is related not only to nineteenth-century evolutionary theory but is also blended with gnostic and Hermetic myth.

The root race system appears to conflict with Darwin but Blavatsky intended it to

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2 1980, 48.
incorporate him, or at least biological evolution as it was understood in the 1880s. Her proposal rests its plausibility on making pre-human root races inhabit less solid bodies. Thus they are not subject to the same physical laws as life on earth, the “denses” of the planets. If the early root races are held to be less material than animal life, then it can be affirmed that animals developed on earth by a natural process while also asserting that humankind, as the destined “middle link,” had already developed via amorphous and ethereal bodies outside this system—on other, less solid earths, perhaps—over vast aeons, only to connect with our earth at a later date.

The evolution of these body types rests on nineteenth-century theories about the relationship between spirit and matter, some of which were promoted by reputable physicists, which have been discussed in earlier chapters. If the earth is seen as the most solid of material objects, preceded and succeeded by finer gradations of matter, then all else comes into focus, and even the most outlandish and unscientific sounding forms and creatures have some kind of plausibility.

Blavatsky’s description of the transformation of the modes of reproduction from race to race owes something to both myth and Darwin. The first race, which is amorphous, reproduces with sweat, moving to egg reproduction in the second. The eggs give birth to hermaphroditic creatures, and then, “gradually and almost imperceptibly” lead to “beings in which one sex predominated over the other, and, finally, to distinct men and women.”

Both root race theory and the general spiritualist notion of soul progress are dependent upon important components of the great chain of being, namely the principle

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of continuity, which offer the possibility of infinitely small gradations of existence
between the material and spiritual worlds, and the population of each niche with teeming
millions of entities, inhabiting bodies which are still thought of and described as
“material,” but also seen as ephemeral and even invisible. To be sure, there are also many
permutations of great chain type ideas in Hinduism and Buddhism, with multiple levels
of heavens and hells, and they no doubt added to the appeal of updated elaborations of
hierarchical theories of existence.

Earlier, when I mentioned that Blavatsky’s great arc, replacing the great chain,
sits uneasily atop the Darwinian tree of life, I might also have noted that Blavatsky
herself envisioned an inverse tree of life hanging down from the heavens, whose
bottommost branches entangled with the topmost branches of Darwin’s tree of life,
branch to branch rather than trunk to trunk, in reverse of the way a reflection of a tree
would appear in a lake. The Mahatma Letters attempted to theologically incorporate the
Darwinian tree metaphor with the Hermetic maxim connecting macrocosm and
microcosm in the following passage:

Take Darwin’s genealogical tree of life of the human race and others and
bearing ever in mind the wise old [Hermetic] adage, ‘as below so above’—
that is the universal system of correspondences—try to understand by
analogy. Thus will you see that in this day on this present earth in every
mineral, etc., there is such a spirit….Every grain of sand…is that spirit
crystallized or petrified….How then can we doubt that a mineral contains in it
a spark of the One as everything else in this objective nature does?4

The upper tree, in Blavatsky’s system, emanates downwards from the source of creation and culminates in its bottommost branches with “mind” or “consciousness,” which become entangled with the physical forms developing on the topmost branches of the physical tree of evolution. It is an uneasy system that still creaks with tension between a panentheism in which all of matter is ensouled, and an idealism that views all of matter as unreal. Another metaphor that helps to clarify Blavatsky’s scheme is that of an inverted rainbow superimposed upon the upper branches of the Darwinian evolutionary tree. Both images maintain a vertical orientation but the crux of Blavatsky’s system is the point at which mind or consciousness integrates with biological life, and then begins its return journey to the One, up the rainbow path, which eventually, in root race theory becomes a spiral.

As discussed in chapter 5, root race theory not only attempted to incorporate biological evolution but also to bring Hindu and Buddhist ideas into a Western esoteric system. Blavatsky herself claimed that root race theory was revealed directly in a Tibetan manuscript known as the “Stanzas of Dyzan.” In The Secret Doctrine, she quotes cryptic passages from this text, calling it a Tibetan manuscript “of untold antiquity” to which she had access.5 Root race theory emerges in the context of Blavatsky’s commentary on these “stanzas.” In spite of much searching on the part of dedicated Theosophists and the unearthing of a few parallels between the stanzas and various Eastern texts, no trace of the “Stanzas” has been found.

The best scholarly consensus at this point is that the stanzas were probably channeled or authored by Blavatsky. They use Sanskrit terminology and adopt arcane phrasing that evokes ancient authority. The Secret Doctrine presents the Stanzas themselves as commentaries on the more exoteric Tibetan manuscripts such as those becoming available in the West through translation at the time. In an Orientalist move, Blavatsky established the primacy of her text by describing authentic Tibetan manuscripts as being “full of myths, blinds and errors,” while hers preserved even more ancient tradition. With this description, Blavatsky sought to preserve authority for her own work over any Tibetan Buddhist text that might come to light.

In Edward Said’s parlance, Blavatsky was operating in the true Orientalist tradition of “always converting the Orient from something into something else.” She becomes the interpreter with the key, with her “truchement,” or interpretation, as Said frames it, making her the spokesperson for an unchanging “Wisdom of the East.” Nevertheless, parts of her work, even as they repurposed Asian philosophy, did so in a somewhat accurate and reverential manner. And although she often made pronouncements that sought a scriptural authority, she did try to preserve some of the tone of inquiry from Isis, stating that The Secret Doctrine “does not impose itself as an infallible dogma.”

As far as the source of the information in the Stanzas, I propose that they make more sense if seen as a continuation of many of the goals of Isis, updated for the 1880s. India notwithstanding, Blavatsky was still attempting to create an authoritative system
that would harmonize Hermeticism and Kabbalistic interpretations of Genesis with the Eastern scriptures to which she had been exposed—as well as answer the challenge of Darwinian natural selection, long geological time scales, and fossil discoveries. Root race theory thus gelled by answering questions that had been troubling Blavatsky for some time in a way backed by the seemingly definitive authority of ancient Eastern scripture.

Reincarnation and Soul Progress in Spiritualist Conceptions of Multiple Planets

At this point, it is appropriate to take a few steps back from root race theory and discuss the spiritualist background of two components of the root race system, reincarnation and the existence of life on pre- and post-earth planets, which, as we have seen, had been a common Western esoteric trope since Swedenborg. For spiritualists, life on these other planets was sometimes conceived of as a post-resurrection life, but also a form of progressive reincarnation. The concepts of multiple planets and multiple future lives tended to go together in spiritualist circles, though not without controversy over terminology, particularly as it related to reincarnation.

But, as mentioned, the opposition to reincarnation by some spiritualists was not based in support for Christian theology of one life and one Savior, but rather on their uncomfortability with the implications of parts of Eastern reincarnation systems. The 1870s and 1880s were a time of ferment and synthesis on these topics, and the 1888 The Secret Doctrine can be seen as an attempted coup de grace in the sustained dispute with Emma Hardinge-Britten. In her 1876 Art Magic Hardinge Britten had actually offered an early and clumsier prototype of Blavatsky’s legitimization through Eastern scripture, which discussed extraplanetary life and denied reincarnation from an allegedly “Hindoo”
Art Magic described the Hindu Vedas as superior, “the oldest written Scriptures in existence,” which had articulated the immortality of the soul when the Egyptian civilization was “yet in its infancy.” It also employed Sanskrit terms like *akasha*, a word usually translated as “space” or “ether.” Hardinge Britten described *akasha* as a universal force, “the growing power of plants,” and the “life of men and animals,” and compared it with magnetism and Levi’s “Astral light” in a vitalist framework.

Hardinge-Britten’s rejection of reincarnation was incorporated into an alleged channeled Sanskrit work that attempted to shoehorn Eastern wisdom into the ready-made boxes of spiritualist thought. *Art Magic* described the document as having been miraculously written in Sanskrit on blank paper in the presence of a twelve-year old “Hindoo” girl medium, the Orientalized subject who provides authority to this nineteenth-century spiritualist revelation. Concerning human past and future states on other planets, the purportedly “Hindoo” manuscript (sounding like vintage Hardinge Britten) had this to say:

Man lives on many earths before he reaches this. Myriads of worlds swarm in space where the soul in rudimental states performs its pilgrimages ere he reaches the large and shining planet named the Earth, the glorious function of which is to confer self-consciousness. At this point only is he man; at every other stage of his vast wild journey he is but an embryonic being…a rudimental shape with rudimental functions, ever living, dying, sustaining a

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10 Hardinge Britten 2011, 19, 21.
fleeting, spiritual existence, as rudimental as the material shape from whence it emerged; a butterfly springing up from the chrysolitic shell, but ever as it onward rushes, in new births, new deaths, new incarnations, anon to die and live again, but still stretch upward, still strive onward, still rush on the giddy, dreadful, toilsome, rugged path, until it awakens once more—once more to live and be a material shape, a thing of dust, a creature of flesh and blood, but now—a man.\(^\text{12}\)

How could the text reconcile this seeming description of reincarnation with its opposition to that very concept? For, after having eloquently described a reincarnation-like process (using the metaphor of chrysalis and butterfly that would also appeal to Myers), the child medium went on to thoroughly deny “transmigration.” The reason is the old one we have seen so often in this narrative, the uncomfortability with a connection between animal and human form. An added concern was the possibility that a soul, once human, might “regress” to inhabit an animal body:

It is from the dim memory that the soul retains…of its countless migrations through the various undertones of being that antedate its appearance on this earth as a man, that the belief in the doctrine of the metempsychosis (transmigration of souls through the animal kingdom) has arisen. Yet it is a sin against divine truth to believe that the exalted soul that has once reached the dignity and upright stature of manhood should, or could, retrograde into

\(^{12}\) 2011, 23–29.
As noted by Marc Demarest, editor of a critical edition of *Art Magic*, Blavatsky quoted an excerpt from Hardinge Britten’s “Hindoo” channeled work in *Isis Unveiled*. However, Blavatsky omitted the discussion of animal transmigration that follows it immediately.14 The “Hindoo” text’s telling use of “metempsychosis” and “transmigration” situates the debate in the realm of semantics. Clearly, both Hardinge-Britten and Blavatsky wanted to preserve forward progress of souls into new forms after death while denying that humans can regress into animal forms. Even Blavatsky’s later shift on reincarnation attempted to preserve this distinction. Blavatsky’s alleged flip-flop on reincarnation and justification of her own consistency is a complicated one, and beyond the scope of this work, but a detailed footnote provides some avenues for further thinking.15

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13 2011, 29.
14 See Blavatsky 1960 (1877), 1:368.
15 The topic of Blavatsky’s “shift” on reincarnation has been much discussed. She denied reincarnation in *Isis* but made it a central part of her salvation scheme in *The Secret Doctrine* (Hanegraaff 1998, Hammer 2004, Goodrick-Clarke 2010, Lavoie 2012, 188–94). A consensus seems to have formed around the notion that Blavatsky rejected reincarnation initially due to its repugnance to some spiritualists, such as Hardinge Britten, but accepted it later after other spiritualists who supported it, such as followers of Anna Kingsford and Alan Kardec, began to promote progressive schemes incorporating many lifetimes (see Lavoie 2012, 130–142). In addition, Blavatsky’s greater exposure to Indians in India led her to understand its importance. As mentioned in chapter 4, her denial of reincarnation was connected with her attempt to deny communication with spirits by limiting the after-death existence of a personality. As many scholars have demonstrated, beliefs in reincarnation, though found in many cultures, take a variety of forms, and may or may not include karma as a form of compensation or retribution (see Obeyesekere 2002). Blavatsky’s adoption of and use of the Eastern term *karma*, meaning act or deed, and often fate, takes on a distinctly Western cast. As Hanegraaff describes it, “[t]he theosophical approach is basically eclectic: selected concepts of Hinduism and Buddhism were adopted insofar as it seemed that they could be assimilated; if not, they were either ignored or given a new meaning. This does not mean, of course, that theosophy owed nothing to the Orient. It seems evident that karma, in particular, became of central importance only after Blavatsky’s travel to India in 1878” (1998, 455).

Blavatsky’s rejection of reincarnation in *Isis* stems more from her spiritualist concerns than any kind of defense of one earthly lifetime per soul. She did discuss reincarnation as a possibility in *Isis*, though generally using the terms “metempsychosis” and “transmigration.” And while she rejected reincarnation, a passage from *Isis* does suggest her support for “transmigration.” The relevant passage invokes the Zohar, a common Western source for reincarnation beliefs: “Nothing is eternal and unchangeable…it must either progress or recede; and a soul which thirsts after a reunion with its spirit, which alone confers upon it immortality, must purify itself through cyclic transmigrations” 1960 (1877), 2:280).

Her rejection of reincarnation also did not mean that she did not see the human soul as continuing in other
Regardless of the motivation for the shift, for our purposes it is sufficient to note that the components of Blavatsky’s mature reincarnation system are those that were palatable to Western sensibilities, in that regression of humans into animal bodies is rejected, the purpose of reincarnation is seen as education or progress, and the disposition of the soul into other bodies after death is made contingent on a Western-style credit-debit ledger of karmic deeds. This is a syncretistic project, as Hammer points out, and Blavatsky was innovating even as she combined.  

The hundreds and thousands of lifetimes required for salvation in the new soteriology of *Esoteric Buddhism* reveal the importance of reincarnation to Blavatsky’s later work, and to a complete understanding of the complex syncretism that went into forms of existence after death, and indeed, in other “bodies,” yet those she termed “astral.” For example, in February 1876 she wrote to C.C. Massey that an “elementary” goes on to form the fetus and the human body, as well as the germ of the “astral body,” so that “while it is true that there is reincarnation in one sense, in the other is untrue” (cited in Lavoie 2012, 135). Her correspondence, as quoted by Lavoie, makes clear that the origin of her opposition to reincarnation lay in spiritualist politics and battles over terminology, as well as her desire to preserve eternal human progress. Lavoie also argues that though she tried to distance herself from Kardec and his “Spiritism,” “Blavatsky owed much of her philosophical conceptualizations to” him (2012, 141). Kardec’s system included a belief in progression to perfection via reincarnation along the path leading from matter to spirit and potentially on other worlds, including planets other than Earth, which was seen as the most material and “farthest from perfection” (Kardec quoted in Lavoie 2012, 136). As Lavoie notes, beginning in 1882 with an article called “Fragments of Occult Truth,” Blavatsky adopted reincarnation and did not further change her position (see 2012, 136). Blavatsky’s 1886 attempt to defend her consistency on reincarnation is less than convincing, and it is very probable that the shift was due to a corresponding shift in her audience of potential converts, the spiritualists. As Hammer notes, in 1882, Anna Kingsford’s *Perfect Way* had been published, and “was crucial in achieving critical mass for the controversial doctrine…. Coincidentally or not, theosophical writings began to mention reincarnation as a spiritual truth for the first time around 1882” (2004, 465). At that time, Hardinge Britten had not been associated with the Theosophical Society for some years, and gaining her support was no longer a goal for Blavatsky.  

Hammer (2004, 469): “The construction of tradition, the bricolage from bits and pieces of such originally distinct historical sources, masks the novelty of Blavatsky’s overall conception. Essentially, the theosophical view of the transmigration of souls is not so much Oriental or Platonic, as a typically nineteenth century construction. Three key ideas run through Blavatsky’s description of the chain of rebirth. The first is the fact of Orientalism itself. The frequent references to India and the East rather than to e.g. Plotinus or Paracelsus are in themselves a phenomenon of the post-Enlightenment era. The second is the placement of reincarnation within the arguably most overarching meta-narrative of the nineteenth century: evolutionism…. The third element is the synthesis of these ideas with yet another metanarrative of the nineteenth century: the view that humanity is divided into races and peoples with clearly definable properties.”
root race theory. Hanegraaff has argued that it is karma, and not reincarnation, that is the central Eastern concept upon which her salvation scheme pivots, but the two are linked.17

Moving beyond the reincarnation question, the “Hindoo” system of *Art Magic* also provides a prototype of the root race system of planetary evolution. Thus when root race theory talks about the transformation of planets, it appears to be referencing not only the general spiritualist idea of soul progress through other “earths” but also probably specifically Hardinge Britten’s version of it. These additional planets are described by Hardinge Britten’s improbable child medium who, after denying “metempsychosis” and “transmigration,” goes on to reveal that there are “various lower earths” through which the soul journeys *prior* to life on earth.

Then, “after the soul’s birth into humanity, it acquires self-consciousness, knowledge of its own individuality, and closing up forever its career of material transformations, with the death of the mortal body, it gravitates on to a fresh series of existences in purely spiritual realms of being. Here the farther purifications of the soul commence anew.”18 Hardinge Britten’s system also described earlier inhabitants of earth as living in more ethereal bodies.19

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17 See Hanegraaff 1998. Blavatsky described karma and reincarnation as being “inextricably interwoven” in *Secret Doctrine* (1993 [1888], 2:303). And further, that present circumstances are the result of past-life actions: “Many of us are now working off the effects of the evil Karmic causes produced by us in Atlantean bodies” (1993 [1888], 2:303). In the same passage, she went on to describe the central location of reincarnation in her soteriology: “It is only the knowledge of the constant rebirths of one and the same individuality throughout the life-cycle; the assurance that the same MONADS—among whom are many Dhyani Chohans, or the ‘Gods’ themselves—have to pass through the ‘Circle of Necessity’ [an Orphic reference], rewarded or punished by such rebirth...are the same who are now amongst us—nay, ourselves, perchance; 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,” including inequalities of birth and fortune, ‘undeserved suffering,’ etc.” (1993 [1888], 2:303).

18 2011, 30.

19 The “dwellers in the primal states of Eden” are “only Spirits.” And yet though only “spirits,” they also take on forms made of matter, albeit of a finer type than ours. They go through “myriads of forms and myriads of earths whereon their probations are outwrought” and the soul, “expelled from one material shape enters another” (2011, 30).
To explain ethereal bodies, Hardinge Britten turned to other types of ethereal or invisible matter which, as we have seen in earlier chapters, was also proposed by Andrew Jackson Davis. “Ether is matter in so rare and sublimated a condition, that its divisibility into particles is no longer possible to man in his present stage of scientific attainment,” she wrote.\(^\text{20}\) She used the phrase “unparticled matter” to describe the contents of space, a term which was also used, according to Demarest, by Andrew Jackson Davis and Edgar Allen Poe.\(^\text{21}\) These speculations on unparticled matter can be seen as an expansion of the principle of continuity in the terminology of nineteenth-century science. Thus in ideas about life on other globes, reincarnation, and finer forms of matter, we can identify important components of root race theory already present in Victorian spiritualism and ready to be incorporated into Blavatsky’s compelling and influential recombination.

**Root Race Theory as a Continuum in Blavatsky’s Thought**

The notions of unparticled matter and more ethereal future globes give a deeper logic to some of the pieces of root race theory. But Blavatsky, who had read more widely in both esoteric and scientific literature than Hardinge Britten, was not satisfied with the system of either *Art Magic* or *Isis*. She also needed to account for the biologically theorized more primitive (speechless) nature of early humans and follow the lodestone of her favorite Hermetic and Kabbalistic myths while accommodating elements of Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Root race theory satisfied these criteria.

\(^{20}\) 2011, 14.

\(^{21}\) Poe wrote in his 1844 *Mesmeric Revelation*: “He is not spirit, for he exists. Nor is he matter, as you understand it. But there are gradations of matter of which man knows nothing: the grosser impelling the finer…. The ultimate or unparticled matter not only permeates all things, but impels all things” (quoted by Demarest in *Art Magic* 14n116).
As mentioned, root race theory can be best understood when considered as having
developed on a continuum from *Isis* to the *Mahatma Letters* to the *Secret Doctrine*. The
system solved some leftover problems from *Isis* and introduced others, including
incoherencies. As mentioned in chapter 5, in root race theory, the earth itself, and the
bodies that inhabit it, becomes ever more material for the first three root races; the fourth
represents the greatest level of descent into matter, and souls are meant from there to
begin progress towards more ethereal forms, beginning with the fifth. Blavatsky’s *Secret
Doctrine* version of root race theory largely parallels Sinnett’s narrative, and presenting a
kind of fuzziness between a root race and a “round.”

She explained that earth is destined to go through seven “Rounds,” during the first
three of which it “forms and consolidates,…during the fourth it settles and hardens;
during the last three it gradually returns to its first ethereal form: it is spiritualized, so to
say.”22 Likewise, the bodies inhabited by souls reincarnating successively through these
“rounds” would etherealize after the fourth, becoming less physical and ultimately
transcending physicality over the next several million years.

Like the seven earths, the bodies inhabited by the souls of the “root races” also go
through a densification and etherealization process. During the first two root races, souls
or monads did not require physical human bodies at all. During the third, they incarnated
in hermaphroditic (but still possibly ethereal) bodies, which later separated into male and
female, and sexual reproduction began. These bodies lived, according to Blavatsky, on
the continent of Lemuria, more than seven million years ago, and included giant ape-like
humans. The fourth root race incarnated on Atlantis and were giant-sized humans.

22 1993 (1888), 1:159.
In future root races, we are told, as bodies become more spiritual, sexual reproduction will no longer be required. Since the fourth root race was the most material, the fifth is therefore destined to evolve bodies that are progressively more spiritual for the next several million years. This depiction of the root races maps more or less onto the four or five “races” already described in Isis, and with the sixth and seventh being considered as a return to the ethereal forms, the entire seven-race system can be shown to have been present in embryo in Isis (see Table 13). This is supported by Blavatsky’s Isis statement on Genesis as proof text: “The whole Darwinian theory of natural selection is included in the first six chapters of the Book of Genesis.” Table 13 suggests the progressive development of the system over an eleven-year period. The logic behind the development of the system can be seen if we consider transitions from left to right across the rows of the table.

**Table 15: Development of Root Race Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root Race or Round (not always equivalent)</th>
<th>Isis Unveiled (1877)</th>
<th>Mahatma Letters (1880-1884)</th>
<th>Secret Doctrine (1888)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Demiurge, Adam Kadmon, Hermaphroditic or Hermetic androgyynes</td>
<td>Ethereal with monstrous bodies</td>
<td>Sexless, no type or color.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Male and Female</td>
<td>Gigantic but more condensed</td>
<td>Inactive androgyynes; “sweat-born” and “boneless,” evolve an egg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Sons of God</td>
<td>Body compacted but form of a giant ape</td>
<td>Moves from bisexual unity to separating hermaphroditic; a vehicle of divine wisdom, beginning of sexual reproduction (Lemuria); intellect. Men with appearance of apes but can think, speak and have a visible “third eye” and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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23 1960 (1877), 1:303.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root Race or Round (not always equivalent)</th>
<th>Isis Unveiled (1877)</th>
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<th>Secret Doctrine (1888)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mediumistic talents. Sons of Wisdom (Hermetic creator gods) endow proto-humans with soul.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Giants</td>
<td>Giant stature decreases; language perfected</td>
<td>Still giants (Atlantis) Development of the animal soul as vehicle for human soul. Bodies most material. Breeding between humans and animals. Modern survivals are some Africans, aborigines, and “primitives.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>Present humans: Spiritual ego struggles with body and mind</td>
<td>Human soul develops. Includes Aryan race. Skin color ranging from white to dark brown, almost black, red-brown-yellow, all fifth race; decline in physical strength and health.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Development of buddhic soul, awakening of dormant powers, “sixth sense”; reason, intellect and soul must assimilate to spirituality; Sinnett: sixth round perfection, transcendence.</td>
<td>Will overlap the fifth. Will not regain gigantic proportions but gradually transcend flesh. Sons of god or adepts as prototypes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>Humans become gods or godlike.</td>
<td>Divine beings, creation and reproduction without sex.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All along, the unspoken template remains the Hermetic one that Blavatsky had relied upon in *Isis*, of androgynous existence preceding gendered, giants preceding modern humans, and the sons of God from Genesis equated with Hermetic creator deities and prefiguring human divinization. This provides support for my argument that the Hermetic narrative provides the bones of root race theory and that additional concepts—
other Western esoteric, Eastern, and scientific—are brought in as enhancements and reinforcements.

The worst contradictions and clashes of the system come from its attempt to place intellect at the bottom and most material sweep of the arc, while spirituality is at the top. Thus, language and speech are later and material developments, and intellect declines during the upward progress. One may ask how early races can be seen as both more spiritual and less intellectual, while also at times more culturally advanced. At the bottom of the curve is the contemporary human—at maximum stage of linguistic and intellectual development—after which the spiritual is intended to once more take precedence, spoken language to become less important, and spirit to overtake mental activities. The divine humans of the seventh root race are thus supposed to be devoid of and not requiring either speech or intellect.

Greater insight into the refinement of ideas from Isis to the Secret Doctrine can be gained by examining first the chronological development of Blavatsky’s interpretation of Hermetica and Kabbalistic texts and second, the identity and transforming role of the “sons of Wisdom,” or “sons of God.” While examining this transformation, we will also look in more detail at her thoughts on sexuality, and how she incorporated sexual reproduction into the system as a temporary and ultimately undesirable state of affairs while yet insisting that “double evolution” was compatible with biological evolution. A corollary to this question is how she yet supported the additional tension of the Hermetic notion that existence in human flesh was a necessity for salvation and divinization. Finally, we will return to the question of psychic phenomena, which become, as exhibited by the adept or son of God, the proof of the entire process of evolution as salvation.
The First and Second Root Races

In *Isis*, Blavatsky had already identified the early races as hermaphroditic and emerging from Adam Kadmon, the primordial Kabbalistic human: “The first races of men were spiritual…created with all the faculties of the Deity…for they were the direct emanations of Adam Kadmon, the primitive man.” 24 Adam Kadmon, who is said to be hermaphroditic, and often depicted as colossal, provides some of the structure of races one through three. These hermaphroditic beings are described in Corpus Hermeticum 1:17 as being created out of water and fire, a form of generation that becomes the template for generation by superior humans.

In *Secret Doctrine*, unlike Adam Kadmon, the first two races are not hermaphroditic but not gendered at all. The first root race is described as having “neither type nor color” but “colossal form,” 25 again suggesting an invisible and amorphous spiritual body. As mentioned, physical continents are correlated with each root race, the first with a nameless and placeless continent, while the second with a “hyperborean,” arctic continent. The second root race is described as being “boneless” and “sweat born,” and without “mind, intelligence and will.” 26 The second root race had amorphous, sexless (not hermaphroditic) bodies, and developed from watery emanations of the first. For the transition between the second and the third race, Blavatsky drew on the “Stanzas of Dyzan” and stated that the second root race evolved an egg from which the bisexual unity of the third was born.

Of course, an egg is a common trope in world mythology, but I suggest two

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24 1960 (1877), 2:276.
primary sources in Western esoteric and Hindu mythology, as proposed even by Horace Hayman Wilson, translator of the Vishnu Purana in 1840 to which Blavatsky had access. Wilson himself believed that Western esotericism had its roots in the East. He made direct connections between the Vishnu Purana’s creation story and Orphic and Neoplatonic myth, including the androgynous nature of early divine beings. He speculated that this may be as a result of “doctrines, as well as articles of merchandise” having been brought to Alexandria from India “in the early ages of the Christian era.”

In Wilson’s translation, the Vishnu Purana describes the creation of a “vast egg” where Vishnu “the lord of the universe…assumed a perceptible form.” Wilson comments on the “mundane-egg” as cross-cultural metaphor and connects it with Orphic and Neoplatonic myth.

He also connected the egg-born being with hermaphroditic creation, commenting on the notion that the “first visible male being” emerging from the “mundane egg…united in himself the nature of either sex, abode in the egg, and issued from it.” Wilson quoted an unnamed Greek source on the topic: “this first-born of the world, whom they represented under two shapes and characters, and who sprung from the mundane egg, was the person from whom the mortals and immortals were derived. He was the same as Dionusus [sic].” The primary source of the egg-born second root race thus is still the Western esoteric, with Hindu texts serving only as selective confirmation.

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27 In his preface, H. H. Wilson speculated that the Alexandrian philosopher “Ammonius” had learned from the Vedas and Puranas the “doctrine of the indentity [sic] of God and the universe” (1961 [1840], viii).
28 1961 (1840), 17n29.
Hermaphroditism and the Beginning of Gendered Reproduction in the Third Root Race

It is in the egg-born hermaphroditic third race trending towards gendered that things become most complicated. Continuing her assertion that science proves esoteric doctrine, Blavatsky referred to the “progressive order of the methods of reproduction, as unveiled by science,” declaring it to be “a brilliant confirmation of esoteric Ethnology.” She described the progression of reproduction from fission, which she associated with the first root race, to budding (the second), to “intermediate hermaphroditism” in the “early Third” race, and finally “true sexual union” in the “later Third.”

She explained that “from being previously asexual, Humanity became distinctly hermaphrodite or bisexual; and finally the man-bearing eggs began to give birth, gradually and almost imperceptibly in their evolutionary development, first, to Beings in which one sex predominated over the other, and, finally, to distinct men and women.”

Her use of the words “gradually” and “imperceptibly” evokes both the great chain’s principle of continuity and the biological language of natural selection. She seemed here to be referencing the Hermetic scene of the separation of the sexes that describes how, following the seven androgyne generations, “all living creatures being hermaphroditical, or male and female, were loosed and untied together with Man; and so the males were apart by themselves, and the females likewise.”

Blavatsky tells us that sexual, physical humans appeared midway through the third race and reproduction began

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32 Blavatsky had some understanding of natural selection but sought to get around it by appeals to Wallace. In The Secret Doctrine, she wrote, “One of the luminaries of the modern Evolutionist School, Mr. A.R. Wallace, when discussing the inadequacy of ‘natural selection’ as the sole factor in the development of physical man, practically concedes the whole point here discussed. He holds that the evolution of man was directed and furthered by superior Intelligences, whose agency is a necessary factor in the scheme of Nature” (1993 [1888], 1:107).
33 Corp. herm. 1.18 (Everard 1650, 24; Randolph 1871, 37).
approximately eighteen million years ago, on a continent known as Lemuria.\textsuperscript{34}

One piece of scientific evidence that Blavatsky may have come across that seemed to support aspects of her theory was the growing consensus in evolutionary biology that hermaphroditic reproduction preceded sexual reproduction. For example, according to Jonathan Hodge, Lyell had “hypothesized that each species originated in one place, not many, and as a single first pair or lone hermaphrodite.”\textsuperscript{35} In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin speculated that embryology might offer a clue to the origins of vertebrates in the invertebrate and hermaphroditic Ascidian type of mollusc.\textsuperscript{36} Darwin had developed some of his ideas about an evolutionary progression from asexual to hermaphroditic and sexual reproduction while working on barnacles from 1846 to 1854. As summarized by Jim Endersby, during this period, “as he studied the dizzying diversity of barnacle reproductive strategies, [Darwin] decided that all organisms must originally have reproduced asexually, then hermaphroditically and finally sexually.”\textsuperscript{37}

However, Darwin rejected true hermaphroditism in mammals. He speculated that whatever rudimentary vestiges of sex organs mammals may possess, it is “improbable in the highest degree” that an ancient mammal possessed organs of both sexes, but rather that “when the five vertebrate classes diverged from their common progenitor the sexes had already become separated.”\textsuperscript{38} Nevertheless, the common notion of a progression of development from asexual to hermaphroditic to bi-gendered would have, in Blavatsky’s mind, reinforced the power and appeal of her root race theory and reaffirmed the validity

\textsuperscript{34} 1993 (1888), 2:156–57.
\textsuperscript{35} Hodge 2009, 47.
\textsuperscript{36} 2006 (1871), 893–94.
\textsuperscript{37} Endersby 2009, 79.
\textsuperscript{38} 2006 (1871), 895.
of the Hermetic proof text.

**Of Apes and Humans: The Third and Fourth Root Races**

Although Blavatsky regularly offered skeptical retorts to Huxley (and less often to Darwin), she yet clearly accepted the truth of the biological development of life on earth and insisted that her system supported it. As we have already seen, she tended to seize upon those scientific arguments that offered support for her theories while ignoring those that did not. But she did make a number of statements from 1880 onwards specifically opposing the evolution of humans from apes. For example, the *Secret Doctrine* declares that: “Nothing had ever been said in the [Mahatma] ‘letters’ to warrant the assurance that the Occult doctrine has ever taught, or any Adept believed in, the preposterous modern theory of the descent of man from a common ancestor with the ape—an anthropoid of the actual animal kind, unless metaphorically.”

Blavatsky realized she was contradicting Sinnett here, but stated that he made a mistake in *Esoteric Buddhism* when he asserted without question the descent of humans from apes. But as I demonstrate below, she still thought that her system was compatible with what was known about evolutionary biology, based on the science of her day as she understood it, wild as her shoehorning may appear today.

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40 Although in *Isis* she had stated that “Physical man, as a product of evolution, may be left in the hands of the man of exact science,” 1960 (1877) 1:153), she specifically opposed human descent from primates in *Secret Doctrine*. She assembled evidence from anti-Darwinian biologists to support alternative biological theories connecting humans and animals. First, a German scientist, Julius Wiegand, who had, according to her, demonstrated that the “ape…has evolved from man” (1993 (1888), 1:184n). Another piece of evidence opposing a common ancestor for humans and apes were fossil records that she said demonstrated that “primeval man…has remained stationary in his human specialization ever since his fossil is found in the oldest strata.” She was willing to entertain any alternative theory, and appealed also to Haeckel’s embryology, which she said suggested human embryos resembled those of dogs just as much as primates (1993 (1888), 2: 258–59).
As mentioned, she could always rely upon the notion of other earths and less-material bodies to sidestep such problems. For the ape-like but less material members of the third root race provide her own missing link. Just a couple of pages after denying human descent from apes, she allowed that humans did previously inhabit ape-like forms: “It is not denied that in the preceding Round man was a gigantic ape-like creature; and when we say ‘man’ we ought perhaps to say, the rough mould that was developing for the use of man in this Round.”\(^{41}\) In this phrase, “the rough mould,” we find the key to her conceptual blending. The figure of a “gigantic ape-like creature” allowed her to preserve the typology of giants preceding humans, but perhaps in a less solid form, while also accounting for a physical and biological connection between “quadrumana” and man but making man prior to today’s primates. Here Blavatsky is continuing to riff on Wallace and Hardinge Britten’s idea that mind developed separately from body.

That Blavatsky felt a need to incorporate an “ape-like creature” into her system demonstrates that she believed that nineteenth-century evolutionary biology could not be ignored. And her language surrounding the third root race did attempt to harmonize with aspects of the current biological speculation about the progenitors of humans, with reference to the lemur and the orangutan. The lemur, a small primate native to Madagascar, had been given a prominent place in a “Tree of Life” sketched by the biologist Ernst Haeckel, which depicted the “lemuroidea” as “semi-apes” preceding “apes” and “Ape-Men.” Though Blavatsky did not specifically mention lemurs in connection with root race theory, it is rather tidy that she associated her “gigantic ape-like creature” of the third root race with the mythical or lost continent named for a primate.

\(^{41}\) 1993 (1888), 2:261.
Blavatsky’s complex story of the ultimate connection of the human soul with biological life occurs in this imagined space.

The orangutan is a clear inspiration for the “gigantic ape-like creatures” whom Blavatsky (through the Stanzas) elsewhere describes as “crooked, red-hair covered monsters.” In the eighteenth century, the orangutan had often been described and depicted with human characteristics, such as being able to mate with humans, wear clothing, and use tools—in fact as being much closer to humans than later research revealed it to be. Blavatsky’s description of a gigantic red hairy ape clearly referenced the orangutan, and made these improbable creatures the site of transition in the scale of development from spiritual to intellectual, and for the development of both speech and gendered reproduction which, she had mentioned, occurred midway through the third root race. The “men” of the third, i.e., the ape-like bodies, gradually lost their spirituality, their “still semi-astral forms consolidated,” and they became more intellectual as they also shrank in size. The key to her system remains the spectrum of existence from spiritual to material, which can be used to resolve any inconsistencies. These are not material apes, but ethereal ones!

Thus we are left with the improbable vision of giant and intelligent ape-like

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43 See Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014.
44 The reverse attempt to connect humans with primates strains with contradiction as she must now carefully state that the orangutan along with the gorilla and other primates “are the latest and purely physical evolutions from lower anthropoid mammalians” (1993 (1888), 1:193). Her descriptions of the relationship between humans and primates continue in this contradictory vein. For example, the following passage suggests that human entities did inhabit animal forms, as implied by one of her favorite Kabbalistic passages “a beast…[becomes] a man” (1960 (1877) 1: 302n2). She stated that the human form had existed as an “astral and ethereal” prototype and that the creator demigods had “evolved the protoplasmic forms” on earth to eventually create a “basic mould” for the human but that this mold had also been used for the “elements of all the past vegetable and future animal forms of this globe” and thus it could be stated that “man’s outward shell” had passed through “every vegetable and animal body” (1993 (1888), 1:282).
45 1993 (1888), 2:689.
creatures, who are elsewhere described as either not speaking, or having only the beginnings of speech, transitioning ultimately by the end of the third race (still “gradually and imperceptibly”) into smaller, more intelligent, and verbal beings. Eventually, by the fourth race, now developing on the continent of Atlantis, they “perfected” language and increased their knowledge to the point that they possessed technology superior to that of the nineteenth century: “The ‘Lemuro-Atlantean’ was a highly civilized race, and if one accepts tradition…he was higher than we are with all our sciences and the degraded civilization of the day.”

But the gigantic apes had another important place in the root race system. They had cross-species intercourse with mammals (a feat still possible, we are told, earlier in earth’s history) and gave birth to creatures that were later mistaken for Darwin’s missing link, but in reality post-dated humans: “These ‘Men’ of the Third Race….through promiscuous connection with animal species lower than themselves, created that missing link which became ages later (in the Tertiary period only) the remote ancestor of the real ape as we find it now in the pithecoid family.”

The offspring of the union of the third-race ape-men and mammals continued to breed and gave birth to a variety of offspring, including the ancestors of contemporary “savage” and “primitive” races, who yet bore some superiority to fourth and fifth-race humans by being more spiritual and less intellectual. This myth represents just one of

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47 1993 (1888), 1:190.
48 She tells how the “narrow-brained” and unintellectual became “a thinking and already a speaking man” by the end of the third race (1993 [1888], 1:191). This led her back to racial hierarchies, and to the argument that the present-day savages, though intellectually inferior, were actually both descendants of these human-animal hybrids and remnants of earlier and more spiritual races. She suggested that the “lowest specimens of humanity (the ‘narrow-brained’ savage South-Sea Islander, the African, the Australian) had no Karma to work out when first born as men, as their more favored brethren in intelligence had.... In this respect the poor savage is more fortunate than the greatest genius of civilized...
two stories of procreation outside the human root races, as will be discussed in the next section. It is these two myths in particular that were difficult for many to accept, and generally were ignored in later esoteric systems, possibly because they violated some of the principles of blending theory, as discussed in chapter 8.

Trompf offers some insight into the uneasy alliance between the disparate components of root race theory. “The problems Blavatsky sought to solve here,” he writes, “were the discrepancies between what she took to be the persistent backwardness of many peoples like the Australian Aboriginals and the remarkable achievements of those who created [ancient] cities, as well as between the diversity of savage beliefs discovered by ethnographers and the primal monotheism imaged in the Bible (and other texts).”

According to Trompf, Blavatsky was also addressing “apparent tensions” between ancient tradition and “newly emergent Anthropological construction of ‘the primitive,’” as by Spencer and Tylor. “The myth of the [past] Golden Age somehow had to be squared with Science’s contrary projection of dull-witted, stone-chipping hominids in *fonte et origine.*” Thus in her third and fourth root races, “special developments occurred which accounted for the discrepancies between ancient and modern insights.” He concludes, “Blavatsky creates a system which is “an ambitious synthesis and a persuasive explanatory completeness” that “accounted for a pristine past, great catastrophes, biblical antediluvian miscegenation,” all “deployed to demonstrate that, even while the cosmic

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countries” (1993 [1888], 2:168). Note that this hierarchy closely follows Huxley’s line, with Australians at the bottom and most “pithecoid” (Huxley 1863, 155–59).
49 1998, 283.
50 1998, 283.
journey to materialization is necessary, it is attended by evils.”

As she attempted to account for the “evils” of life in the flesh, Blavatsky also found herself developing a new mythology around sexuality that connected lust with black magic and the decline of psychic power. Although purportedly non-religious and “scientific,” her system retained elements of the Christian mythology she sought to replace, as well as other pieces of the Hermetic-Kabbalistic puzzle. This required even more rhetorical gymnastics and the introduction of the offspring of fallen angels into the third race, where they pick up the story from the red hairy giant ape-men.

Although Blavatsky opposed the Christian doctrine of original sin and the sexual interpretation of the Fall, she could not resist making her own associations between sexual desire and a type of fall. This perhaps can be traced in part to the negative valence already placed on lust in her favorite esoteric doctrines. Having identified the third race as the moment when sexual reproduction entered human existence, Blavatsky now reached back into her quiver of proof texts and developed an allegorical interpretation of the fall of angels in Genesis 6, which is equated with a “fall” into matter:

The Third Race was pre-eminently the bright shadow, at first, of the gods, whom tradition exiles on Earth after the allegoric war in Heaven; which became still more allegorical on Earth, for it was the war between spirit and matter. This war will last till the inner and divine man adjusts his outer terrestrial self to his own spiritual nature. Till then the dark and fierce

passions of the former will be at eternal feud with his master, the Divine Man.
But the animal will be tamed one day, because its nature will be changed, and
the harmony will reign once more between the two as before the
“Fall,” when even mortal man was created by the Elements and was not
born.\textsuperscript{52}

This is an allusion to Corpus Hermeticum 1:15, which states that the hermaphroditic
beings reproduced by way of the elements, and not generation. Thus the prophecy of the
end of sexual reproduction is already contained in the root race progression—harmony
will “reign once more” when the animal nature is changed and people are created, not
born, as in the beginning.

The “fall into matter,” while related allegorically to the Christian Fall, which
Blavatsky rejected, nevertheless maligns lust and pleasure. One can see this theory
developing out of the giant, conscious apes, whose bodies she portrayed as an internal
duellist for warfare between flesh and spirit. As mentioned, some but not all third-
race ape-humans had begun, according to her, to breed with the mammals already
undergoing development on earth. But later, at the end of the third race, after millions of
years of evolution, angels also bred with these developing humans. Let us more closely
examine this second miscegenation, which she tries to link (in a contradictory way) with
progressive materialization and the beginnings of sexual reproduction (which she
describes as originating in more than one way).

Already in \textit{Isis}, Blavatsky had identified the “sons of God” of Genesis 6:4 with

\textsuperscript{52} 1993 (1888), 2:268.
the “minor gods mentioned by Plato in the Timaeus….who fashioned and created all forms.”

In *The Secret Doctrine*, she linked the biblical antediluvian “sons of God” with the seven demigods or creators of Corpus Hermeticum 1:16–18. She later identified their enfleshment as the “Mystery [of] Nature being mingled with Man.” She also identified these beings as Hindu demigods called Pitris. And they play a double role in her system, both as creators and as templates for future human life as creators of life themselves.

Man comes from “a group of seven Celestial men or Angels, just as in *Poimandres,*” she declared. Poimandres is a name often used in the past for the first book of the Corpus Hermeticum. *The Secret Doctrine* describes these Hermetic divine creators as having the task during the third race of ensouling and creating humans. Later, at the beginning of the fourth race, they also take “wives of a lower race, namely, the race of the hitherto mindless men,” the offspring of the mammals and third-race ape-men, and teach them. And yet these divine creator demigods, equated also with the angels of Enoch, can sin. Not only do they give in to lust, but some of them refuse to do their job and create and give life to humans, which is necessary for evolution.

It is lust that leads to enfleshment and materialization. Both Genesis and the

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53 1960 (1877), 1:149–51.
56 1993 (1888), 2:263.
57 1993 (1888), 2:239.
58 One can see this enfleshment myth already developing in *Isis* in her description of the “coats of skin” from Genesis as an enfleshment and materialization. She declared that the “real meaning of the allegory” of the Flood and the expulsion from the Garden were that the post-Flood bodies were “tainted by the material” (1960 [1877], 1:150). So the stories of Noah and the sons of God become commingled in enfleshment and materialization of bodies. See also Blavatsky (1993 [1888], 2:411), for association of Noah’s Flood and enfleshment. She gave conflicting reasons for the destruction of Atlantis. At times she described continent-ending cataclysms as being part of the natural cycle of life (1993 [1888], 1:369; 2:350, 410), she elsewhere, echoing Biblical Flood narratives, could not resist blaming the calamity on “sorcery” turned to by some Atlanteans (1993 [1888], 2:636), which she had also connected with phallic worship and sex magic. These deluges would take on a “karmic” cast in twentieth-century depictions of Blavatsky’s myth. See Prophet 2014.
apocryphal Book of Enoch are tapped as proof texts for this trend. Materialization and enfleshment are linked with the introduction of sexual reproduction and, by implication, theologies of expulsion from Eden (begetting in pain and sorrow, Gen. 8:16): “The third race fell—and created no longer: it begat its progeny.”

This occurred at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth race.

The discussion of creation and reproduction walks a fine line between opposing lust while allowing for procreation and avoiding Christian original sin. Corpus Hermeticum 1:18, the primary proof text of this component of root race theory, does appear to warn against sexual desire, though it may be talking only about attachments to the material world. In the Everard translation that Blavatsky probably relied upon, the passage on creation and procreation juxtaposes the command to reproduce with a Platonic opposition to the material world. It reads in part: “And straightway God saith to the Holy Word, Increase in increasing, and multiply in multitude all you my Creatures and Workmaships. And let him that is endued with Mind, know himself to be immortal; and that the cause of death is the love of the body, and let him learn all things that are.”

By juxtaposing a command to multiply with a warning against love of the body, this passage suggested to Blavatsky an association of “love of the body” with “lust.” Although she regarded sexual reproduction itself as less than desirable, and a temporary product of enfleshment, it is lust rather than sexual reproduction that becomes the cause of some of the calamities that attend the root races. During the fourth root race, on the

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60 Corp. herm. 1.18 (Everard 1650, 24; Randolph 1871, 37); “desire” (Salaman, van Oyen and Wharton 1999, 21); “cupiditatem” (Foix-Candalle 1574). The original Greek word being translated here is ἐρός (Nock and Festugière 1945, 13). See DeConick 2001, 251–52 for a Valentinian gnostic interpretation of the use of ἐρός in Corp. herm. 1.18.
continent of Atlantis about two million years ago, she described a degeneration into “phallicism and sexual worship.”

She associated these practices with black magic and the loss of psychic powers, as explored in the next section.

This association seems indebted to Hargrave Jennings, who incorporated into his 1870 work a survey of phallic symbols throughout Asia, and had theorized about the nature of primitive sex worship, a portrayal that influenced both Hardinge Britten and Blavatsky. Jennings relied upon an article by an Edward Sellon entitled “On the Phallic Worship of India,” read before the Anthropological Society of London in 1863-4. Jennings commented on Sellon as follows: “The phallic worship prevailed, at one time, all over India….Though it has degenerated into gross and sensual superstition, it was originally intended as the worship of the creative principle in Nature.”

Taking a cue from Jennings, Blavatsky presented sex worship as having originated in the rites celebrating Nature, but degenerated into worship of the body itself. She used terms that evoke the “love of the body” of Corpus Hermeticum 1.18 and a phrase from 1.19, “he that through the error of love, loved the body.” These terms perhaps led her to attempt a distinction between procreation and lust. She wrote of “natural union, as all the mindless animal world does in its proper seasons” and opposed it to non-procreative sex, i.e., “abusing the creative power…desecrating the divine gift, and wasting the life-essence for no purpose except bestial personal gratification.”

Her talk of abusing the “creative power” brings to mind the Hermetic demigods who are

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62 Jennings 1870, 40.
64 Corp. herm. 1.18–19 (Everard 23–4).
endowed with the creative power of nature.

The myth became more elaborate. She described how, during the fourth root race, “lust” turned “the holy mystery of procreation into animal gratification.” And so the entire fourth race, incarnating now on Atlantis, changed due to lust—“physiologically, morally, physically, and mentally….until, from 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.” She concluded that “intellectual evolution” is a curse rather than a blessing.66

But this did not mean that she was opposed to procreative sex, as long as it was necessary for the propagation of the human race. Like Christian theologians before her, she opposed only nonprocreative sex. She suggested that in some ways, the human might benefit from procreating more like animals, not less, in that animals mate only in season, and not throughout the year. In this depiction at least, the animal nature becomes the more pure. For animal procreation as she described it is less lustful: “the animal world, having simple instinct to guide it, has its seasons of procreation, and the sexes become neutralized during the rest of the year. Therefore, the free animal knows sickness but once in its life—before it dies.”67 Degeneration due to lust then becomes a central characteristic of modern fifth-race humans. And we see once again an arrow pointing both directions. Animal nature is both something to be overcome in the struggle between flesh and spirit, and something to be imitated for its instinctual harmony with the laws of Nature.

67 1993 (1888), 2:412n*.
Others in the spiritualist tradition such as Hardinge Britten and Warren Felt Evans also opposed non-procreative sex, though they did not use as much detail as Blavatsky. And they, too, believed that future humans would transcend sexual reproduction.

Blavatsky elaborated on this idea in her system. In future root races, we are told, as bodies become more spiritual, sexual reproduction will no longer be required. Since the fourth root race was the most material, the fifth is therefore destined to evolve bodies that are progressively more spiritual during the next several million years. Mating will take place for procreation as needed. But as humans incorporate the higher principles of the seven-part soul, they will eventually leave behind the unnecessary “physical” body.

Ironically, a system that called itself evolutionary sought to eliminate sexual reproduction, the engine of natural selection. It did so by focusing on the inheritance of acquired characteristics which, as we have seen, was at the time considered even by Darwin to be possible. In “double evolution,” the engine of evolutionary transformation, as will be shown next, is human effort through spiritual discipline and the development of psychic powers.

The Sixth and Seventh: Theurgy, Lost Senses, and the Sons of God

Looking toward the future of humanity, Blavatsky performed some metaphorical shifts along the rising arc of her great inverted rainbow. For the way up does not directly mirror the way down. Coming races are not seen as repeats of the gigantic beings of the first through third. Rather, they suggest the perfecting of current fifth-race humans. The third race already provided a compelling portrait of beings who moved from divine to human existence. These individuals are identified variously as adepts, biblical sons of God, Christ, Mahatmas, masters, and Dhyāni Chohans. (Dhyāni Chohan is a term that seems to
have originated with Blavatsky. It takes the Sanskrit and Pali term Dhyāna, meaning meditation, and combines it with Chohan, which is related to a ruling Rajput caste in India, but which Theosophists take to mean “lord.” She often referred to Dhyāni Chohans as templates for future human development. They, together with other divine humans such as Hermes, became the obvious templates for the sixth and seventh root races.

Even in *Isis*, Blavatsky had described future races as similar to Bulwer-Lytton’s Vril-ya, at “but one remove from the primitive ‘Sons of God.’” Thus the sons of God, so useful in the third root race descriptions of the fall, also become the prototype for future human development. These “divine” beings are required in Hermetic fashion to live, work, and gain experience in the material world: “There are no such privileged beings in the universe…as the angels of the Western Religion and the Judean. A Dhyāni Chohan has to become one; he cannot be born or appear suddenly on the plane of life as a full-blown angel.”

Among the few concrete descriptions Blavatsky gives of future humans is to compare them with “adepts” of the past. She tells us that a sixth “sub-race” of the fifth race will eventually incarnate on the West Coast of the United States, and “sow the seeds for….a forthcoming, grander, and far more glorious Race than any of those we know of at present….the majority of the future mankind will be composed of glorious Adepts.”

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68 1960 (1877), 1:296.
69 1993 (1888), 1:221. Dhyāni Chohans, according to Blavatsky, “are the collective hosts of spiritual beings—the Angelic Hosts of Christianity, the Elohim and ‘Messengers’ of the Jews—who are the vehicle for the manifestation of the divine or universal thought and will” (1993 [1888], 1:38). “The seven sublime lords are the Seven Creative Spirits, the Dhyāni Chohans, who correspond to the Hebrew Elohim…. The Dhyānis watch successively over one of the Rounds and the great Root Races of our planetary chain” (1993 [1888], 1:42).
70 1993 (1888), 2:446.
But what will these adepts look like? The obvious templates are those Hermetic god-men already discussed and Mahatmas like Koot-Hoomi—humans or former humans. The *Mahatma Letters* predict that humans will become Dhyāni Chohans in the “seventh round” and Koot-Hoomi, a human being, is well on his way to becoming one. 71

French has written convincingly about the importance of Blavatsky’s innovation to the notion of “adept” or “master,” and its implication for future soteriologies. “Central to Blavatsky’s endeavor was the Master; only he could personify her desire to wrest matter from the Materialists and refashion the *anthropos* as the centre of a re-enchanted world: he was, after all, the ideal, template, and proof of conscious evolution.” 72 French comments on the importance of the adept as master in the salvation scheme: “The Masters, by enfleshing, as it were, evolutionary progress toward perfection, indicated that though enlightenment could not ever be achieved in one lifetime, it is nevertheless possible to make rapid spiritual and physical advances within the human span.” 73

The master shows the way of escape from the deterministic cycles of root race theory, a point already made by Sinnett but elaborated by Blavatsky. Her innovation, French argues, comes from her Spiritualist background, which had “confirmed in her mind the absolute requirement for ante-mortem conscious transformation in any sophisticated esotericism.” For Blavatsky, according to French, “transformation” was “synonymous with conscious evolution.” 74 French identifies her “endeavours to transpose traditional notions of alchemical, ritual, and initiatic transformation for post-Enlightenment concepts of evolution, progressivism, and perfectibilism” as “perhaps her

71 Barker, ed. 1975, Letter 13, 75, 78.
72 French 2000, 1:121.
73 French 2000, 1:211.
74 French 2000, 1:188.
most important singular contribution to the domain of occultism.” Thus Blavatsky’s adept is one who is able by application of will and mental discipline to effect a kind of salvation before death. And yet it is not a salvation without assistance, for the Dhyāni Chohans or creator demiurges are seen as guiding and directing the grand course of evolution—intelligent designers made to meet Wallace’s specifications.

In *Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky describes the “wires of evolution” as being “pulled by unseen hands,” those of the Dhyāni-Chohan. She describes these intelligent creators as former humans who “guide” evolution according to what she calls the laws of natural selection:

Every ‘Spirit’ so called is either *a disembodied or a future man*. As from the highest Archangel (Dhyāni-Chohan) down to the last conscious ‘Builder’ (the inferior class of Spiritual Entities), all such are *men*, having lived aeons ago, in other Manvantaras, on this or other Spheres; so the inferior, semi-intelligent and non-intelligent Elementals—are all *future* men….The whole order of nature evinces a progressive march towards *a higher life*. There is design in the action of the seemingly blindest forces. The whole process of evolution with its endless adaptations is a proof of this. The immutable laws that weed out the weak and feeble species, to make room for the strong, and which ensure the ‘survival of the fittest,’ though so cruel in their immediate action—all are working toward the grand end. The very *fact* that adaptations *do* occur, that the fittest *do* survive in the struggle for existence, shows that

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75 2000, 1:188n38.
76 1993 (1888), 1:277.
77 1993 (1888), 1:278.
what is called ‘unconscious Nature’ [a footnote here states that Nature “cannot be ‘unconscious’”] is in reality an aggregate of forces manipulated by semi-intelligent beings (Elementals) guided by High Planetary Spirits (Dhyani-Chohans), whose collective aggregate forms the manifested *verbum* of the unmanifested Logos, and constitutes at one and the same time the mind of the Universe and its immutable Law.\(^78\)

At the center of the discussion of these future humans is the question of psychic phenomena, which now become the proof of advancing evolution. Phenomena are said to travel in tandem with the recovery of lost senses, and are deeply embedded in the archetype of adept and master. And yet, as we have already seen, discussion of these phenomena was surrounded by difficulties in both the spiritualist and Vedantist communities in which Blavatsky had moved. They were both objects of fascination for practitioners and opposition by the religious authorities.

Blavatsky used the template of fallen god-men recovering lost talents through evolution to provide a confusing picture of the development of heightened senses in future root races. She predicted that in the “next or fifth Round,” a “sixth sense” would develop, ether would be visible, and recognized as an “‘agent’ for so many things” and that “those higher senses” would be “susceptible of complete expansion.”\(^79\)

For descriptions of what these future senses might be like, Blavatsky referred back to the lost talents of earlier root races. For example, the organ of perception known as the “third eye,” which disappeared during the fourth root race. She equated the loss of

\(^78\) 1993 (1888), 1:277.
\(^79\) 1993 (1888), 1:258.
this sense to the biological atrophy of vestigial organs, and identified the pineal gland as a sort of vestigial third eye, which she maintained had existed in earlier races of humans.\(^80\)

The physical third eye had been visible in the third race, and thereafter disappeared slowly, beginning in the middle of the third sub-race of the fourth root-race. But even after its physical disappearance, it continued to be used by some, “psychically and spiritually.” Thus “its mental and visual perceptions lasted till nearly the end of the Fourth Race.”\(^81\)

Those who could use the third eye were said to possess talents like clairvoyance and telepathy, among others—the sorts of phenomena with which Victorian-era spiritualism was obsessed. But Blavatsky was careful not to encourage the development of these talents in the present. The “recovery” of lost talents would take place, as she described it, over the grand cycles of root race development. The loss of the third eye was caused by the practices of black magic and sex worship in earlier civilizations, and so pursuit of magical talents was not necessarily the way to pursue a faster evolution. Her cautionary tone was more authoritative than that of Sinnett, and can be understood in light of the shift in objectives that had occurred in Theosophical history after the 1879 journey to India.

As mentioned in chapter 5, the Indian period coincided with several shifts in emphasis for the Theosophical Society. First, the objective of forming a “brotherhood of humanity” was added. And the original objective, of studying “the laws which govern the universe,” had by 1886 become one of several, and was rephrased as follows: “A third object, pursued by a portion of the members of the Society, is to investigate unexplained

\(^{80}\) 1993 (1888), 2:295.
\(^{81}\) 1993 (1888), 2:306.
laws of nature and the psychical powers of man.” By 1888, when Blavatsky had established her private “esoteric section” to investigate these powers, the third objective had been revised yet again to stipulate that such investigation be pursued only by those fellows of the society who were members of this “distinct private division” under Blavatsky’s direction.\(^8\)

Éliphas Lévi, Hardinge Britten, and Blavatsky all struggled with the question as to whether the practice of magic or ritual and the display of phenomena were available to all or simply the few.\(^9\) All three of them split magic into good and evil, white and black. In his 1997 work Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society, John Patrick Deveney demonstrates that while the society claimed in later years that it was not founded for the purpose of theurgy or the development of psychic talents, in fact this interest was there from the beginning, particularly in attempts to experiment with astral projection and produce phenomena at a distance. As French describes it, Deveney explores “the tension which resulted from the often mutually antagonistic desires for gnosis and magia which characterized the ambitions of early Society members.”\(^10\)

The edits made to the third objective demonstrate that in negotiating this delicate balance, although she could issue warnings, Blavatsky could not altogether ignore or

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\(^8\) See Ransom 1938, 252–54, 549.

\(^9\) In her work Art Magic, which promised a course in the art of magic but actually contained very little practical description, Hardinge Britten gave contradictory messages. On the one hand, in her conclusion she expressed the possibility of extending the applicability of magic to all: “The forces of spirit are designed for good and use, or they could not be accessible to man. In ages yet to come, when the earth and its living freight are all spiritualized, that which is magic now will be ordinary practice then…. Until then ‘knowledge is power,’ and all men by knowledge may achieve the power of practicing art magic” (2011, 226). However, as noted by Demarest, she contradicted this universal application elsewhere by restricting the pursuit of occult powers to those who can undergo initiation and apprenticeship (2011, 226n539).

\(^10\) 2000, 1:142.
discourage the pursuit of phenomena, so she sought to corral it within a small circle of private students. But root race theory did encourage people to pursue psychic development, especially the passages of the *Secret Doctrine* that associated salvation in future root races with the progressive etherealization of the body and the development of a more spiritual set of senses.

For example, Blavatsky had associated the escape from karma of past misdeeds with the complete opening of the “spiritual intuitions” and the casting off of the “thick coats of matter.” 85 But in spite of having written of lost healing arts in *Isis Unveiled*, she barely mentioned healing in *Secret Doctrine*, where she stated only that “man must heal himself before he can heal others.” 86 Blavatsky’s conflicted feelings about phenomena and the physical body make it difficult to locate the eighth identified element of Roszak’s typology, “healing promotes evolution, and religion is therapy,” within Blavatsky’s evolutionary system.

The question of phenomena, along with whether or not to incorporate initiation and ritual into the system, would occupy future generations of Theosophists and cause much debate and schism. These phenomena also played an important role in the evolutionary system proposed by Frederic Myers, as will be reviewed in the next chapter. However, Myers would reach a very different set of conclusions.

*Teleology and the Goals of Soul Evolution*

Before leaving behind the Russian Madame—after spending three chapters reviewing the contradictions of her system and the controversy that dogged her colorful life—the

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85 1993 (1888), 1:643–44.
86 1993 (1888), 2:517.
question of teleology should be addressed. We cannot discuss teleology without seeking answers about the elusive seventh root race, the culmination of human evolution, about which not much is said in her writings—it is after all more difficult to find words to clothe the formless and ineffable.

Future races, as mentioned, would also leave behind intellect, speech and knowledge as they approach greater spirituality. This is certainly a reversal of Neoplatonic systems, which identified intelligence with “nous,” the second hypostasis. It is difficult to imagine gods without speech or intellect, but “higher” forms of communication are imagined in this gently clashing system that somehow managed to capture the imaginations of future generations of theosophists and New Age thinkers.

In the introduction, I discussed ways to classify evolutionary systems, and defined as teleological those systems that suggest humans are either destined to be transformed by returning to a fixed starting point or “advancing” to a pre-ordained state of godhood. I mentioned Hanegraaff’s distinction between closed and open systems, and between linear and spiral or cyclic. Closed linear teleological systems would include classical systems of emanation and return from a divine source. Blavatsky’s is more of a spiral, referencing as she does the cyclic nature of time in Hindu mythology, and it fits in with Hanegraaff’s typology of an open-ended spiral.87

On the one hand, she described return as mirroring descent in a fairly straightforward Neoplatonic typology. For example, “The law of evolution is now carrying us along the ascending arc of our cycle, when the effects will be once more re-merged into, and re-become the (now neutralized) causes, and all things affected by the

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former will have regained their original harmony.” But she went on to describe this return as “the cycle of our special ‘Round,’ a moment in the duration of the great cycle, or the Mahāyuga.”88 She frequently referenced Hindu age theory. And yet she also stated that the cycles do not affect “all mankind at one and the same time,” and the individual is the unit of evolution, which is accomplished through initiation.89

Like Sinnett, Blavatsky looked for ways to preserve free will in a seemingly deterministic root race system. To the extent that she had incorporated elements of determinism from Hindu scripture, she sought to modify them with Hermetic myth and Enlightenment values. As French puts it, “Blavatsky required a teleology which supported an optimistic progressivism.”90 And so, although in Hindu systems each “great year” of the exhalation and inhalation of Brahman ends exactly where it started, in her version, a “cycle” ends with some kind of added benefit, the Hermetic accumulation of knowledge and experience. She quoted in Secret Doctrine a passage from Isis Unveiled that reads, “having reached the lowest point, humanity reasserts itself and mounts up once more, the height of its attainment being, by this law of ascending progression by cycles, somewhat higher than the point from which it had descended before.”91

And in other passages she described a return that is not the same as descent: “On the ascending arc, Spirit is slowly reasserting itself at the expense of the physical, or matter, so that, at the close of the seventh Race of the Seventh Round, the Monad will

88 1993 (1888), 1:641.
89 1993 (1888), 1:641–42. Her view of kalpa theory was probably mediated from the edited version of the Mahābhārata published in Calcutta between 1834 and 1839, as suggested by Boris de Zirkoff (cited in French 185n30, referencing Blavatsky’s Collected Writings 2:536). Her ruminations on these theories certainly incorporate world-ending cataclysm and inflamed some New Age millenarian movements. See Prophet 2014.
90 2000, 1:188.
91 1993 (1888), 1:641, citing Isis Unveiled 1:34.
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.”

The need for god as man to acquire experience and wisdom are common explanations of course in the Hermetic tradition for the purpose of human existence. She made the connection clear in the following passage:

The [secret] Doctrine teaches that, in order to become a divine, fully conscious god—aye, even the highest—the Spiritual primeval Intelligences must pass through the human stage. And when we say human, this does not apply merely to our terrestrial humanity, but to the mortals that inhabit any world...Each Entity must have won for itself the right of becoming divine, through self-experience.

Blavatsky turned to Hegel for support in her progressive view: “Hegel, the great German thinker, must have known or sensed intuititionally this truth when saying, as he did, that the Unconscious evolved the Universe only ‘in the hope of attaining clear self-consciousness,’ of becoming, in other words, man.”

Blavatsky went on in the same passage to hold out the distant and vague possibility that future advanced humans could become Hermetic creator deities themselves.

French cites a passage from Blavatsky’s later work in which she elaborated on the Hermetic self-working-out of post-root race salvation: “[T]he spirit has to pass through the ordeal of incarnation and life, and be baptized with matter before it can reach

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92 1993 (1888), 2:180–81, emphasis added.
93 1993 (1888), 106:1.
94 1993 (1888), 1:106.
experience and knowledge. After which only it receives the baptism of soul, or self-consciousness, and may return to its original condition of a god, plus experience, ending with omniscience...an absolute conscious deity, removed but one degree from the absolute ALL." This description evokes the earlier cited quotation from the Hermetic Definitions of Asclepius: “Just as the body is marvelously moulded in the womb, likewise the soul in the body.”

Blavatsky’s vision of these future humans employed insect metaphors to imagine the way the human soul collects experience in its varied lifetimes prior to divinization. In the Key to Theosophy, she described the Ego or “spiritual individuality” as being like an insect, a bee to be precise, which collects honey from “every flower,” thus garnering from “every terrestrial personality, into which Karma forces it to incarnate, the nectar alone of the spiritual qualities and self-consciousness.” The goal is realized when it ultimately unites all the qualities into “one whole and emerges from its chrysalis as the glorified Dhyan Chohan.”

And finally, addressing the question of ultimate goals and endings, Blavatsky asserted that the system of development described in The Secret Doctrine “has neither conceivable beginning nor imaginable end.” Time relates only to the “phenomenal plane,” but has no “abstract validity” in “the realm of noumena.” With statements like these, she reinforced the open-ended nature of her system, a sensibility that harmonized well with her commitment to the Enlightenment values of progress, the spiritualist notions of unending possibility, and her efforts to harmonize religion with a scientific

95 Collected writings, 8:117, quoted in French 2000, 207–8.
96 Def. 7:2, Mahé 1999, 113.
97 1972 (1889), 168.
98 1993 (1888), 1:43.
spirit of inquiry.

In the next chapter, we will examine the question of what influence her ideas may have had on Myers and his system, before evaluating the conceptual blending of both systems in chapter 8.

**Table 16: Evolution in the Secret Doctrine, Including Root Race Theory**

1. Seven-part anthropology and salvation through synthesizing higher parts of the soul (generally concurs with Sinnett).
2. Densification and etherealization of bodies proceeds through seven rounds, root races and planets (generally concurs with Sinnett).
3. Reincarnation is the mode of progressive soul “evolution,” and karma accounts for differences in souls.
4. “Gradual and imperceptible” transitions between races evokes the principle of continuity.
5. Mode of reproduction changes from race to race, with sweat-born giving birth to egg-born hermaphrodites, who reproduce by will and not generation.
7. Humans did not descend from apes. Third-race humans (less material than ourselves), whose bodies resembled giant apes, mated with mammals; their offspring became the ancestors of modern primates.
8. The process of biological evolution and elimination of unfit species is directed by divine beings who ensoul all of “conscious” Nature.
10. During the fourth root race, black magic and sex worship led to the decline of psychic powers and physical degeneration of humans.
11. Present-day humans are in the fourth round and the fifth root race, the most physical, verbal and intelligent, who are destined to gradually spiritualize.
12. Contemproary adepts and masters demonstrate the possibilities for human evolution.
13. New senses will appear during the sixth root race.
14. Psychic phenomena should be pursued only by the initiated.
15. The need for sexual reproduction will gradually disappear in future races.
16. Speech and intellect will decline as spirit increases in seventh root race humans, who will resemble Hermetic creator gods and “Dhyāni Chohans.”
Chapter 7: F.W.H. Myers, His Influences, and Congenial Evolutionary Vision

We retraverse, from the embryo to the corpse, the history of life on earth for millions of years. During our self-adaptation to continually wider environments, there may probably have been a continual displacement of the threshold of consciousness;—involving the lapse and submergence of much that once floated in the main stream of our being.

—Frederic W.H. Myers¹

The Victorian philosopher, poet, early psychologist, and psychical researcher Frederic W.H. Myers, to whose thought we now turn, explored many of the same questions about psychic phenomena and human evolution as did spiritualists and Theosophists. He was more comfortable than Blavatsky with connections between human and animal and employed scientific methodology in his psychical research. Nevertheless, he charted his own path to human exceptionalism and envisaged the development of artistic and psychic talents as a duty. Like Blavatsky, his allegiance to His system, like Blavatsky’s, incorporated a double-pointing arrow of evolutionary time.

His system of human evolution and destiny was left incomplete upon his untimely death in 1901. The question of his philosophical influences has not been addressed in depth, though Oppenheim² and Myers’s biographer Trevor Hamilton³ discuss them briefly. Kripal describes the import of his work at the borderland between science and

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¹ Myers, 1915, 1:16–17, §115.
² 1985, 269–70.
religion, particularly as it relates to the paranormal, literary creativity, and a Platonic eroticism, and provides a helpful summary of his philosophy and evolutionary vision.\(^4\) I will demonstrate that his influences included not only Neoplatonism and spiritualism, but also A.P. Sinnett. It is also possible that he engaged in subterranean conversation with Blavatsky and the larger body of Theosophical thinking.

Myers, like Blavatsky, developed an evolutionary explanation for psychic talents and powers, but he expanded his scope to unusual gifts such as genius, prodigy, and artistic inspiration. Kripal identifies in Myers a “double language…of the Darwinian and the Neoplatonic,” which underlie his attempt to update Platonism with theories of natural selection while taking into account the insights of modern psychology and psychical research.\(^5\) Egil Asprem has included Myers’s approach under the umbrella of an “open-ended naturalism.”\(^6\) Myers believed that his mature evolutionary system was compatible with what he perceived as the true Christian message but it resonates more with a perennialist and proto-New Age sensibility.

He painted a picture of a human species developing psychic powers that could transform human nature, but he also expanded that nature to stretch beyond the grave, and spent his life investigating the question of whether the soul survived death. As mentioned, Myers also held Darwin in high regard, listing him as one of the “three greatest Englishmen of our century,” along with Wordsworth and Tennyson.\(^7\) In order to better understand Myers’s blending of Darwinian and Neoplatonic themes, this chapter will trace the historical development of Myers’s writings on both evolution and the

\(^4\) 2010, 36–91. See also Kripal 2007.
\(^5\) 2010, 69.
\(^6\) 2014, 302. See also Asprem 2014, 299-304.
\(^7\) 1901, 166.
human psyche.

From the perspective of Hanegraaff’s typology Myers’s vision appears to be open-ended. He did speculate that humans were gifted with a preexisting potential for evolutionary growth as the acquisition of latent talents and senses. He thought that the psychic powers of the few represented dormant senses that could be developed by all. And he believed humans would continue to “evolve” towards divinity after death. Nevertheless, for Myers, the future was not a set template but a mystery, “mellowed with an infinite hope.”8 Myers’s place within Hanegraaff’s typology will become more clear as we examine the development of his system.

**Myers’s Early Work and Influences**

As background to Myers’s thought on evolution, we will here review the beginnings of his interest in psychical research and spiritualism, and in due course his relationship with spiritualists and Theosophists. Myers was one of the key figures in the nineteenth-century Society for Psychical Research (SPR). His interest in the psychic had developed during the 1870s after a spiritual crisis brought on by the challenges of materialism and Darwinism. Myers, whose father had been an Anglican clergyman, struggled with some of the same questions that absorbed other characters in this history. Myers later described the inception of his crisis as follows:

> It must be remembered that this was the very flood-tide of materialism, agnosticism,—the mechanical theory of the Universe, the reduction of all

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8 1915, 2:276, §988.
spiritual facts to physiological phenomena. It was a time when not the intellect only but the moral ideals of men seemed to have passed into the camp of negation. We were all in the first flush of triumphant Darwinism, when terrene evolution had explained so much that men hardly cared to look beyond.⁹

Myers recalled that in his circle of friends, the mathematician W.K. Clifford was proclaiming the “nothingness of God, the divinity of man,” to the agreement of the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, and the positivist philosopher Frederic Harrison was “glorifying Humanity as the only Divine.”¹⁰

Years later, Myers wrote of his struggle with Darwin and speculated that future humans would look back wistfully on Darwin’s work, at first so inspiring, but ultimately as incapable as religion of providing humans with a purpose. They would ask themselves, “what gain, to watch for an hour the inscrutable pageant? to be summoned out of nothingness into illusion, and evolved but to aspire and to decay!”¹¹ This was Myers’s great outcry against the implications of natural selection as he understood it. Yet Myers was another who found hope in Wallace. He referenced Wallace’s proposal that some external influence had affected the “strange intermediate period during which” humans were “passing from brute to man.”¹²

In 1871, Myers, who was in his twenties, sought advice from his mentor Henry Sidgwick, well-known philosopher and Cambridge don. As of 1870, Myers had served as

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⁹ Myers 1904, 33.  
¹⁰ Myers 1904, 33.  
¹¹ Myers 1901, 75.  
¹² Wallace, quoted in Myers 1901, 55.
a lecturer in classics at Cambridge and would shortly take up a position as an inspector of schools. He still considered himself a Christian, but his faith was challenged and transformed over the next few years. His conversation with Sidgwick, which took place during a nighttime walk in November 1871, led him to pursue the scientific exploration of the invisible and to ask whether “observable phenomena” such as ghosts and spirits might lead to information as to “a world Unseen.”\(^\text{13}\) Could science prove religion?

For the next decade, Myers engaged in psychical research with a few close companions under Sidgwick’s mentorship. Myers’s interest in investigating the survival of death was also given personal and erotic immediacy by his love for and the subsequent death of Annie Marshall, a married woman for whom he held an unconsummated romantic passion, and who committed suicide in 1876. His fascination with the idea of contacting her spirit drove his research, though he also later married a woman who supported his ideals.

Myers, like much of the rest of nineteenth-century Britain, was fascinated by the phenomena of spiritualism and their implications for both science and religion. In 1871, William Crookes, a well-known physicist and discover of the element thallium, undertook a set of experiments upon the medium Daniel Dunglas Home, which he published between 1871 and 1874. Crookes believed he had satisfied himself that Home’s phenomena were not produced by trickery. He observed Home seemingly levitate himself, alter the weight of various physical objects without touching them, and even change his own weight.\(^\text{14}\) As mentioned, reports of Home’s phenomena also had a profound impact on Blavatsky, Hardinge Britten, and Wallace. Though Myers did not

\(^{13}\) Hamilton 2009, 82–83.
\(^{14}\) See Crookes 1874, including 24, 38, 89–90.
meet Home, he was influenced by Crookes’s experiments, and began conducting his own research. He was introduced in 1874 to Stainton Moses, who was both a self-trained medium and clergymen, and produced phenomena such as teleportation of objects and automatic writing. Moses impressed Myers and his colleagues, who did not consider him a fraud.

The ultimate impetus to the founding of a society to investigate such phenomena came from William Barrett, a professor of physics who had spent some time researching mediums. Myers and his co-researcher Edmund Gurney insisted that Sidgwick be the first president of the SPR, which commenced meeting in February 1882. In 1883, Myers and Gurney issued a public request for stories of deathbed or crisis apparitions, which led to the publication, in 1886, of their coauthored *Phantasms of the Living*.

Much of Myers’s theorizing on the nature of soul and psychic phenomena emerged from his work with the SPR. Myers and his fellow researchers had initially hoped that their research would support Platonic beliefs about the soul and “the values that they held dear,” as Hamilton puts it, but Myers was soon perplexed by the trivial and unverifiable nature of many communications and the prevalence of fraud and trickery among professional mediums.\(^\text{15}\) Myers ultimately came to believe that he had been too credulous in his early years.

In 1876, a famous fraud conviction of the medium Henry Slade led to greater skepticism on the part of many researchers, and the feeling that there was a need for more rigorous and controlled experimentation. Protocols were developed for detecting trickery, such as tying the hands of mediums, and having them work in daylight and in controlled

\(^{15}\) See Hamilton 2009, 79–177.
settings. Myers eventually came to realize that mediums who had experienced genuine phenomena might turn to fraud when they were unable to produce results on demand. By the mid-1880s, the SPR found itself in an open rift with the spiritualists who had initially welcomed its researches.\textsuperscript{16}

Myers and his fellow researchers published their work in the \textit{Proceedings} of the SPR and also wrote popular articles describing their progress. They eventually came to accept the scientific reality of certain phenomena—particularly telepathy—enough to justify further investigation. Myers also realized that the experiments might be at least as illuminating concerning the minds of living humans as they were for the possibilities of an afterlife.

In order to contextualize his results, Myers began to develop new psychological theories. He placed phenomena on a spectrum ranging from vivid dreams and sleepwalking to feats of genius such as calculation, art, and music—and continuing, as he saw it, to telepathy, teleportation, clairvoyance, and even precognition. Myers, who was described by the historian Henri Ellenberger as “one of the great systematizers of the notion of the unconscious mind,”\textsuperscript{17} worked closely with pioneers of psychology such as William James, and was a close observer of French psychologists Pierre Janet and Jean-Martin Charcot; his theories influenced both Freud and Jung.

Myers coined the term “subliminal self” in preference to the term “unconscious,” since he felt that the idea of a threshold of consciousness more accurately described the phenomena he was studying. He had noticed that many of his cases involved information that the subject was unaware of having been exposed to but which seemed to have been

\textsuperscript{16} See Hamilton 2009, 159–64.
\textsuperscript{17} 1970, 314.
recalled from some submerged stratum of memory. Myers, as mentioned, also coined the term “supernormal” to refer to extraordinary human talents that he believed were not abnormal, but simply represented a higher level of functioning on the spectrum of human abilities. He began to suspect that most of the phenomena recorded around spiritualism and mediums could be explained by the action of the subliminal self—and not disembodied spirits.

In other words, he thought these phenomena might be a normal part of being human, simply an extension of the spectrum of human talents. This line of reasoning—looking at phenomena as emerging from existing talents—also led him to connect his theories with evolutionary biology, particularly theories of vestigial organs. But when he reached the edge of the explanatory power of his scientific theories, he also began connecting them with modified elements of Neoplatonism, spiritualism, and, I argue, Theosophy.

As mentioned, he was skeptical of spiritualist claims that phenomena were caused by departed spirits. This line of reasoning brought him into common cause with members of the Theosophical Society, who likewise were attempting to debunk or explain away the productions of mediums as something other than what they claimed to be. We will

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18 He defined supernormal as follows: “I have ventured to coin the world ‘supernormal’ to be applied to phenomena which are beyond what usually happens—beyond, that is, in the sense of suggesting unknown psychical laws. It is thus formed on the analogy of abnormal. When we speak of an abnormal phenomenon we do not mean one which contravenes natural laws, but one which exhibits them in an unusual or inexplicable form. Similarly by a supernormal phenomenon I mean, not one which overrides natural laws, for I believe no such phenomenon to exist, but one which exhibits the action of laws higher, in a psychical aspect, than are discerned in action in everyday life. By higher (either in a psychical or physiological sense), I mean, apparently belonging to a more advanced stage of evolution” (Myers 1915, 1:5, §105). Kripal proposes that supernormal influenced Joseph Maxwell, who probably coined the term paranormal c. 1903 as a translation into French of Myers’s supernormal. Kripal also points out that supernormal does not mean supernatural, i.e., ghosts or demons, though paranormal has come to do so (See Kripal 2017a, 250; Strieber and Kripal 2016, 41–42).
look more closely at the relationship of Myers’s system to spiritualism and Theosophy after reviewing its early development.

Myers began his popular publications on the topic of psychical research with a strict scientific tone. In 1882, he co-authored an article with Barrett and Gurney called “Thought-Reading,” which was published in the popular general-interest publication The Nineteenth Century. The article took an empirical approach to apparent instances of thought reading, and explored possible physical explanations, such as cues being passed between the sender and receiver by way of “tactile sensibility” or “muscular susceptibility.”

The authors presented the results of some of their experiments in card-reading (the ability of individuals to guess what was on the opposite side of a card presented to them). The article proposed that thanks to various precautions they had taken, “the hypothesis of mere coincidence is practically excluded.” Myers and Gurney went on to suggest that further research was in order, and that they merely employed the term “thought-reading” as a “popular and provisional description,” that was “in no way intended to exclude an explanation resting on a physical basis.”

In the end, they suggested that some kind of physical wave propagation effect might be at work: “We may conceive…that the vibration of molecules of brain-stuff may be communicated to an intervening medium, and so pass under certain circumstances from one brain to another.” Myers continued his cautionary scientific tone in his publications for the Society for Psychical Research. For example, in 1887 he advised

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19 Barrett, Gurney, and Myers 1882, 890.
20 Barrett, Gurney, and Myers 1882, 895.
21 Barrett, Gurney, and Myers 1882, 899.
22 Barrett, Gurney, and Myers 1882, 900.
against the use of “neural action” to describe the process of telepathy, warning that such words might “imply more knowledge than we really possess.”

In 1884, Gurney and Myers published another article in *The Nineteenth Century*, entitled “Visible Apparitions,” which contained preliminary results of their study of crisis apparitions. They had deliberately limited their data set to visions of living humans, and their study therefore to telepathy rather than the possibility of spirit communication. In the article, they maintained the same detached tone of inquiry. They proposed that they sought to take a middle path between “unproved dogma” and “uninquiring negation.” They denied that their data proved either divine intervention in human affairs or law-based actions of “higher intelligences.” Rather they maintained that they were able to explain such visions without “need to postulate the existence of any intelligences except human minds.” They declined to address larger questions of human purpose:

> We have no wish to take wing as…full-blown explainers of the universe—but rather to be accepted as hewers of wood and drawers of water in a territory which inductive science has yet to clear for her own….We have drawn on no creeds; we have appealed to no ‘supernatural agencies.’…Not here…shall we find the ‘Elysian road’ which will conduct man undoubtingly to such beliefs as his heart most craves….There will, we doubt not…be found much that will startle, something that will alarm or repel….But the…collection and colligation of facts…may be rewarded hereafter by the opening of horizons.

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24 Gurney and Myers 1884 (July), 94–95.
25 Gurney and Myers 1884 (July), 93.
26 Gurney and Myers 1884 (July), 94–95.
Myers and Gurney, like Blavatsky, used analogies to known physical phenomena such as electricity and gravitation to propose explanations for telepathic phenomena. But they did not assert any of these analogies as proof of new physical laws: “we must specially warn the reader against concluding, from the word force which we are obliged to use, that the law is necessarily a physical one….the physical analogies hitherto suggested for telepathic impulses are aids to imagination and nothing more.” They noted that several of their cases seemed to have taken place without regard to the limitations of space, across continents, and suggested perhaps a type of “rapport” that knows no physical boundaries. In short, their tone was one of inquiry, not assertion. And yet even at this stage, Myers and Gurney suggested a sort of vitalism and mystical panentheism to explain some of the phenomena:

If the instinct of the vulgar and the intuition of sages should turn out to have been right, and the fact of communication apart from the recognized sensory channels should once be established, then the scope of the laws (possibly even of the physical laws) which concern our deepest being would turn out to have been quite arbitrarily limited….For in this direction may lie our clearest proofs that we are not mere isolated drops in an aimless storm of atoms, but interacting centres of force, and “every one members of one another.”

And so Myers continued his work during the 1880s, maintaining for the most part a scientific tone, but ever so often sketching portions of a theory of everything—of the nature of the soul, life after death, and human destiny. In spite of his assertion that the

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27 Gurney and Myers 1884 (Mar.), 119, citing Romans 12:5.
productions of mediums could largely be accounted for by living persons and the expanded senses of the percipient, he was unwilling to rule out—and eventually ruled in—the existence of spirits as the most logical explanation for certain phenomena. I will argue that although Myers was led by his practical research in his theorizing about the human psyche, his larger system of salvation, including his evolutionary vision, was influenced by both Theosophy and spiritualism, even though he had grave disagreements with both systems.

**Myers and Spiritualism**

Myers moved in the same circles as prominent spiritualists, and as we will see, his evolutionary system made frequent reference to their thought world. In 1878, he met Wallace, who shared with Myers the acquaintance of both Barrett, the founder of the SPR, and the philosopher and psychologist William James (who also engaged in extensive and long-term psychical research).

Wallace, like Myers and Blavatsky as well as James, was opposed to what Fichman calls the “aggressive scientific naturalism” of the 1860s and beyond and was concerned about the implications of evolutionary theory for society in general. For Wallace, as for many Victorians, the basis of concern about the materialist ethos was the corrosive effect it might have on the moral fabric of society. Indeed, Wallace developed

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28 Unwilling to rule out spirits: See Myers 1885a, Jan. 1885, 62–63. Eventual ruling in of spirits: Myers (1915 2:83 §801), presents evidence which he believes “I might fairly claim...[reveals] man’s personality...as a spirit, surviving death.”

29 Wallace was to meet James while on a lecture tour of North America during 1886 and 1887. According to Wallace’s biographer Fichman, “Wallace’s relationship with James,” along with the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, “was crucial to the elaboration and clarification of his own philosophical stance” (Fichman 2004, 105).

30 Fichman 2004, 120.
his own alternative to Darwin’s competition model of natural selection, and promoted models based in cooperative forms of organization.

Wallace, who outlived Myers by twelve years, praised Myers’s 1903 posthumously published *Human Personality* as a “great work” that had attempted to “educate order out of the vast chaos of psychic phenomena.” But Wallace was uncomfortable with the implications of Myers’s theory of the subconscious mind, and whether it could be said to support moral progress. Wallace saw in spiritualism “a pure system of morality with sanctions far more powerful and effective than any which either religious systems or philosophy have put forth.”

Myers for his part was often critical of spiritualism, and mentioned Wallace directly in *Human Personality*: “This work of mine is in large measure a critical attack upon the main Spiritist position, as held, say, by Mr. A.R. Wallace, its most eminent living supporter,—the belief, namely, that all or almost all supernormal phenomena are due to the acting of spirits of the dead. By far the larger proportion, as I hold, are due to the action of the still embodied spirit of the agent or percipient himself.” For example, concerning table-tilting, Myers had written mischievously: “If a table moves when no one is touching it, this is not obviously more likely to have been effected by my deceased grandfather than by myself. We cannot tell how I could move it; but then we cannot tell how he could move it either.”

Myers was not willing to sign on to the religious philosophies of spiritualism, which had influenced Wallace. He declared himself opposed to the “conversion into a

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32 1874, 801.
33 1915, 1:6 §106.
34 1889, 531.
sectarian creed...what I hold should be a branch of scientific inquiry.” Wallace, of course, had been since the 1870s attempting to assist spiritualists to develop a creed. In his 1874 “Defence of Modern Spiritualism,” Wallace promoted the spiritualist belief system as the best hope for an alternative to dogmatic religion. And yet both Myers and Wallace were trying to cultivate a high-minded philosophy in the often uncongenial soil of the sordid and childish antics of spiritualist mediums.

Like Myers, Wallace noted that the communications produced by mediums varied in quality and were often in conflict. But he argued in favor of an underlying unity amidst the cacophony. Though he acknowledged that the communication of spirits through mediums “will be fallible” and “must be judged and tested just as we do those of our fellow-men,” he also believed that the “main features” of spiritualist philosophy and morality were “absolutely in accord” via “mediums of all grades.” He offered hope that the philosophical revelations of mediums might provide a foundation for “concord among mankind in the matter of religion.”

In spite of their disagreement as to the cause of spiritualist phenomena, there appears at least on a philosophical level to be more harmony than difference between Wallace and Myers. When we review Myers’s mature religious synthesis, we may hear in it echoes of Wallace. For Myers was not blind to the need for a moral system to replace discredited religious dogmas. Yet he formally distanced himself from spiritualism after 1885. In a May 1885 letter addressed to a friend, he asked, “Shall you continue…gifts to ‘Light’ [the spiritualist publication] I wonder? I am economizing, I think that my

35 1915, 1:7 §107.
36 1874, 801, 804–6.
37 1874, 806.
economy will take the line of ceasing to donate in that direction.”38

Myers and the Theosophists

In chapter 4, we briefly explored the falling out between Blavatsky and the SPR after an investigation by Richard Hodgson on behalf of the SPR declared her a fraud. Now we may take a step back from that point and look at the earlier days of cooperation between the two groups, and how the rift impacted those who had allegiances in both camps. At least between 1883 and 1885, it seemed that Theosophists and members of the SPR might work together towards a common cause—a reform of spiritualism through science. On May 16, 1883, Myers had dinner with Sinnett. Myers was so impressed that he joined the Theosophical Society a little more than two weeks later.39

Myers may have been influenced in his initial attitudes towards the Theosophists by his friend Charles Carleton Massey, a wealthy lawyer, philosopher, mystic, and independent psychical researcher who maintained a membership in both organizations. Massey was the one to whom he addressed his 1885 question as to whether he would discontinue funding the spiritualist publication Light. Massey was one of the original seventeen founding members of the Theosophical Society in Blavatsky’s New York apartment in 1875, and became the first president of the British Theosophical Society in 1878. Lavoie, in his 2015 biography of Massey, a Victorian gentleman of broad philosophical interests, calls him a “connecting rod” between the various movements in which he participated.40 Myers called Massey the “Begetter of my Occult Being,” and

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38 Myers Papers 19:9, Myers to Massey May 30, 1885, 2. All citations from the Myers Papers are printed courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.
39 Myers was elected to membership of the Theosophical Society on June 3, 1883, according to Price (1986, 2), citing Sinnett’s 1922 The Early Days of Theosophy in Europe.
40 2015, 99.
thanked him for the books he had lent him, as well as for Massey’s own “carefully-read papers” in Light.41

Myers wrote to Massey about his dinner with Sinnett as an event of “intense interest.” He described the evening as follows: “[A] strange sense of intimate comradeship suspended as it were, in the vault of heaven;—of thoughts new & old which shone or melted around the soul’s future & her past, like the lights dying & lights rekindled which make the mystery of the evening sky.” Myers continued, declaring to Massey that he owed him an “obligation” for introducing him to Sinnett, just as he owed one to Stainton Moses for “the belief of our immortality.”42

With Myers now a member of both groups, it seemed logical that the SPR would formally investigate the Theosophical Society, and so in May 1884, the SPR formed a committee to do so. Blavatsky at that time had returned to England after having been in India for several years. She was by then a well-known figure in Europe, thanks in part to Sinnett’s 1881 book The Occult World, in which he described his experiences with her, including her display of various mediumistic talents such as the production of musical tones and showers of roses, and the recovery of lost objects. Sinnett’s Esoteric Buddhism was published in 1883, and the Mahatmas were becoming household names.

In September 1884, Myers met Blavatsky and a party of Theosophists at Elberfeld, Germany. Though “nothing happened actually in my sight,” Myers wrote that all but two of the party of thirteen had “experiences” during the visit. He declared that the witnesses “establish to my mind existence and powers of Mahatmas KH and Maunjah [sic]…. I spent 5 ½ days in Mme. B’s bedroom, cross-examining her as to past life, etc.

41 Myers Papers 19:6, Myers to Massey May 17, 1883, 1.
42 Myers Papers 19:6, Myers to Massey May 17, 1883, 2–3.
and...separate interviews with her pals—Olcott, etc.—asking them separated as to what she had said when they were not there, etc. My confidence in her has increased about fourfold.\textsuperscript{43} He reported having signed up four of the Theosophists to join the SPR.

However, less than a year later, after the Coulombs’ allegations of fraud against Blavatsky, specifically around the production of Mahatma letters, and subsequent investigation by the SPR’s Hodgson, who returned to England from India on April 30, 1885, and began work on an unfavorable report on Blavatsky, things had shifted. On May 30, Myers wrote to Massey regarding a letter Massey had written criticizing Hodgson and complaining about the impact that Hodgson’s report was having on Theosophists in London, particularly Olcott. Myers tried to reassure his friend:

I will show your letter to Hodgson (who will not be in the least offended of your criticism.) I will ask him to let you see what he says about Olcott before it goes into the Proceedings. There are, I fear, some worse inaccuracies of Olcott’s behind,—so I will not discuss this special one at length. I admire the way in which you stand up for your friends! and if I am ever denounced as an impostor (not that Olcott was accused of that), I hope you may be there!

After a talk with Hodgson you might make another speech on the 26\textsuperscript{th} if you still saw reason for doing so. I was much pleased with the attitude of the Theosophists. I thought them much more reasonable and temperate than might have been feared—I hope that needless pain was avoided. Sinnett, I

\textsuperscript{43} Myers Papers 19:8, Myers to Massey Sept 9, 1884, 5.
fear, may be more difficult to convince.\textsuperscript{44}

At this stage, Myers was hoping that the more empirically minded Theosophists might be persuaded to continue their work with the SPR, and that he could salvage his relationship with Sinnett—and with Olcott, with whom he was also acquainted.

Massey, meanwhile, at this time had also begun to turn against Blavatsky. During her stay in India, he had engaged her in a vigorous and challenging correspondence, particularly on the question of the Mahatmas, and forced her to defend her consistency on matters such as reincarnation. The tone of Blavatsky’s replies to Massey suggests she had begun to view him as problematic, in spite of his early support for the Theosophical Society. The Mahatma letters mention him at least fifty times, often disparagingly.

One of the factors contributing to Massey’s shift away from Blavatsky was the revelation of apparent plagiarism when the Mahatma letters were shown to contain unattributed passages from a work by the American spiritualist Henry Kiddle. According to Lavoie, Massey was also skeptical when he learned that Blavatsky had supposedly attempted to get a follower to deliver a Mahatma letter to him in a way that would seem miraculous.\textsuperscript{45} Massey resigned from the Theosophical Society in 1884, though he continued with the SPR for many years. And so, in spite of Myers’s initial hopeful relationships with Theosophists, after the publication of Hodgson’s report in December 1885, the SPR lost most of the joint members of the Theosophical Society, and abandoned any effort at cooperation.

Although the Hodgson report was flawed and it is true, as claimed by

\textsuperscript{44} Myers Papers 19-9, Myers to Massey May 30, 1885.
\textsuperscript{45} See Lavoie 2015, 48–50.
Theosophical defenders, that Blavatsky was never formally tested by the SPR, it is likely that schisms would have developed between the two groups in any case, for several reasons. First, there were enough additional questionable occurrences surrounding the Mahatmas to strain the credibility of Blavatsky’s claims, regardless of the truth or falsity of the Coulombs’ allegations. Second, after the experiences with Sinnett, Blavatsky had refused to perform phenomena, and sought to focus purely on her occult philosophy; she probably would not have agreed to be tested like other mediums being examined by the SPR. Other rifts may have developed around the two groups’ competing explanations for psychic phenomena.

Blavatsky’s description of psychic talents in the language of evolution and the recovery of lost senses would have made sense to psychical researchers, but not her explanation of the production of mediums as largely that of astral shells and elementary spirits. And her insistence that only true “adepts” could produce phenomena (as she tried to maintain the distinction between immoral mediums and moral messengers and adepts) was belied by the un-adept-like nature of many of the mediums that Myers and his fellow researchers believed to be genuine. The Mahatma letters dismissed Stainton Moses, for example, as a mere medium and not an adept, based on inconsistencies between his revelations and those of the Mahatmas, as well as his “flesh-eating” and consumption of alcohol.46

Though Myers might have admired Blavatsky’s opposition to materialism and her call for a “scientific” approach to psychic phenomena, after 1885 he studiously avoided any positive description of Blavatsky or her Theosophical teachings. We have no further

details on their relationship, including their conversation of five and a half days. Myers’s later writings contain at least one barbed passage that appears directed against Theosophical teachings, but also demonstrates his familiarity with them.

In the posthumously published *Human Personality*, Myers directly rejected Blavatsky’s notion of occult adepts (though not the idea that higher beings exist). And he requested open-mindedness and scientific honesty: The “inquirer” must not “allow himself to be persuaded that there are byways to mastery,” a reference to Theosophy. He continued:

I will not say that there cannot possibly be any such thing as occult wisdom, or dominion over the secrets of nature ascetically or magically acquired. But I will say that every claim of this kind which my colleagues or I have been able to examine has proved deserving of complete mistrust; and that we have no confidence here any more than elsewhere in any methods except the open, candid, straightforward methods which the spirit of modern science demands.47

This passage suggests Myers’s ongoing discussions with both Massey and Sinnett, though it would be helpful if more evidence were found to clarify their connection. We know that Myers continued a cordial relationship with Sinnett even after the break with Blavatsky. And Sinnett, also after breaking with her, pursued a role as an independent spiritual teacher. As for Massey, he continued a lifelong friendship with Blavatsky’s co-founder, Olcott, and publicly claimed after his exit from Theosophy that he still believed

47 Myers 1915, 2:277 §988.
in “Adept,” or more advanced souls. These connections bear some relevance, as we will see, to Myers’s mature soteriology.

The question of Theosophical influence on Myers is complex. His biographer Trevor Hamilton is convinced that there was an influence. He writes:

The encounter with the ideas of Theosophy helped to confirm, enrich and deepen the channels in which his thought already ran; particularly the idea that access to paranormal powers could be part of the destiny of humankind. They also informed his intuition, increasingly expressed in highly wrought digressions in his later writings, of man’s continuous evolution through a range of experiences and levels, post-mortem as well as pre-mortem, as part of an unending progression towards the Godhead itself in eternal growth.

I think we can assume that he at least was familiar with the major propositions of Isis Unveiled, and that he, like many other eminent Victorians, had read Sinnett’s Esoteric Buddhism. Both works develop notions of double terrestrial and spiritual evolution and pre-date the 1885 rift between the Theosophical Society and the SPR. In fact, these two works probably provide clues to Myers’s initial fascination with Theosophy.

Myers’s evolutionary paradigm developed and was first published between 1884 and 1893. The period 1883 to 1885, as discussed, marked the entry of Sinnett into Myers’s life, as well as his formal break with Blavatsky. It does not seem far-fetched to

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48 Lavoie 2015, 50–51.
49 Hamilton 2009, 137–38.
suppose that his relationship with Sinnett was a catalyst for his new vision, especially as it relates to a narrative of lost evolutionary capacity or latent talents. Myers seemed to say as much in his description of his first meeting with Sinnett—an evening of “thoughts new & old which shone or melted around the soul’s future & her past.”

The Development of Myers’s Evolutionary Paradigm

Around 1885, Myers began to display an independent voice in articles authored separately from Gurney (who was in any case to die suddenly in 1888). Myers put forward his theory of a “secondary self” by which he was able to explain many of the phenomena he was investigating. In an article on automatic writing published in the *Contemporary Review*, another general-interest publication, Myers presented the beginnings of a theory of human evolution based in psychical research.

Myers’s developing evolutionary paradigm built on the generalized progress narrative seen in Tennyson, Chambers, and spiritualism and even Darwin. He wrote in 1885:

> A generation ago there were many who resented the supposition that man had sprung from the ape. But on reflection most of us have discerned that this repugnance came rather from pride than wisdom; that with the race, as with the individual, there is more true hope for him who has risen by education from the beggar-boy than for him who has fallen by transgression from the

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51 Myers 1885a, Jan. 30, 1885, 27.
52 Myers 1885b, Feb. 1885.
He went on to suggest a progressive destiny for the human that had “sprung from the ape.” “Not a straitened and materialized, but a developing and expanding view…drawn from our potentialities rather than our perfections,” a “true subjective unity” waiting “to be realized elsewhere.”

In this passage, he suggested that “experimental psychology,” which could promote both healing and evolutive or adaptive qualities, was the motor of evolutionary transformation. This argument will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter. He also proposed that the healing powers of the secondary self might hold the key to “whether man be but the transitory crown of earth’s fauna, between ice-age and ice-age…or whether it may truly be that his evolution is not a terrestrial evolution alone…but making for a vaster future, by inheritance from a remoter past.” The reference to a “crown” evokes Tennyson’s “crowning race” and Chambers’s “grand crowning type.” But his “inheritance from a remoter past” also alludes to the “pre-terrene” primal germ developed elsewhere in his work, suggesting emanationist cosmologies, certainly Neoplatonic, and perhaps Blavatsky’s or Sinnett’s root races.

His theory of the “secondary self” emerged from his thoughts on hypnosis, which was primarily employed at the time to treat mental and physical illness, but was also associated with evidence of remarkable capacity, which suggested to him a connection between the psychic and self-transformation. In 1885 he proposed that “all psychical, as well as all physiological activities” were “necessarily either developmental or

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53 1885b, Feb. 1885, 249.
54 1885c, Oct. 1885, 20.
degenerative, tending to evolution or to dissolution.” He went on to draw on self-improvement metaphors. “And further, whilst altogether waiving any teleological speculation, I will ask [the reader] hypothetically to suppose that an evolutionary nisus [impulse], something which we may represent as an effort towards self-development, self-adaptation, self-renewal, is discernible especially on the psychical side of at any rate the higher forms of life.”55 Here we have an incorporation of Lamarckian notions of self-evolution into a narrative of human possibility.

Myers went on: “Our question, Supernormal or abnormal?—may then be phrased, Evolutive or dissolutive? And in studying each psychical phenomenon in turn we shall have to inquire whether it indicates a mere degeneration of powers already acquired, or, on the other hand, the ‘promise and potency,’ if not the actual possession, of powers as yet unrecognized or unknown. Thus, for instance, telepathy is surely a step in evolution.”56 But Myers was still developing his system, and he eventually presented contradictory statements as to the direction of his evolutionary arrow. In a note he speculated that telepathy might be both a return to the past and an indication of progress towards a better future:

To avoid misconception, I may point out that this view in no way negatives the possibility that telepathy…may be in some of its aspects commoner, or more powerful, among savages than among ourselves. Evolutionary processes are not necessarily continuous. The acquirement by our lowly-organised ancestors of the sense of smell (for instance) was a step in evolution. But the

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55 Myers 1885a, Jan. 1885, 31.
56 Myers 1885a, Jan. 1885, 31; also incorporated into Myers 1915, 2:84 §802.
sense of smell probably reached its highest energy in races earlier than man; and it has perceptibly declined even in the short space which separates civilised man from existing savages. Yet if, with some change in our environment, the sense of smell again became useful, and we re-acquired it, this would be none the less an evolutionary process because evolution had been interrupted.\textsuperscript{57}

Blavatsky, it will be recalled, had included telepathy and other psychic powers in the lost talents of the third root race, which were meant to be recovered in the sixth. Myers never referenced her system, and further research may identify other avenues by which he may have picked up the narrative connecting lost talents with evolution. His mature system synthesized the lost talents narrative into a new and more congenial evolutionary system. The “savage,” for Myers as for Blavatsky, was a useful source of talents that were presumed to survive from past evolutionary history and might also be recovered by future humans. This was not the last time Myers would suggest that the arrow of evolutionary

\textsuperscript{57} Myers 1885a, Jan. 1885, 31–2n; this passage was incorporated into Myers 1915, 2:85n1, §803. Myers elsewhere went on to suggest that telepathy must be the product of an earlier time, though it also hinted of future capacities; or, as he put it, “such faculty…must date from some earlier and foreshadow some later evolution; even as the rudimentary organs of the imago within the larva indicate that it has sprung from a free-flying insect, and will thereto itself return” (1892b, 528). He frequently used the metaphor of insect larva to describe human existence, and compared humans with grubs, who contain the rudiments of their future existence but may be unaware of their destiny to be transformed into winged insects (see 1915, 1:97 §321). He did not see that telepathy provided an advantage in the struggle for existence, and therefore included it among dormant talents (1915, 1:118–20, §341). Sigmund Freud, unlike Myers, had no difficulty locating telepathy as a rudimentary talent emerging from human evolutionary past. In his \textit{New Introductory Lectures}, he wrote of thought transference and telepathy as reminiscent of communication among insect communities. “We do not know how the common purpose comes about in the great insect communities: possibly it is done by means of a direct psychical transference…One is led to a suspicion that this is the original, archaic method of communication between individuals and that in the course of phylogenetic evolution it has been replaced by the better method of giving information with the help of signals which are picked up by the sense organs. But the older method might have persisted in the background and still be able to put itself into effect under certain conditions—for instance, in passionately excited mobs” (1933, 68–69, emphasis added).
“progress” from animals to humans might point both ways. A bidirectional connection easily lends itself to metaphors based in chains or ladders.

Myers’s developing evolutionary paradigm of psychic talents centers around three concepts. First, that “primitive” human and animal forebears represent repositories of dormant senses for human improvement. Second, that a primordial germ contained the seeds of all senses and talents. And third, that these talents might have been pre-formed by higher intelligences with the intent that they be used not only for development of life on earth, but also in future post-terrestrial existences.

The development of these ideas can be traced to around 1885 as Myers turned to theories of lost talents to explain phenomena he witnessed in his research. In one interesting passage, Myers further developed the evolutionary narrative by appealing to contemporary theories that associated the right-brain with a savage or more primitive past, and the left-brain with more rational and elevated thought. In an appendix to an October 1885 paper, he cited as a generally agreed upon fact that left-brain speech centers are “more evolved than” the right-brain centers.58

He proposed an evolutionary lag between the hemispheres, basing his theory in part on the case of an individual who exhibited multiple personalities, one of whom displayed paralysis on the right side, along with difficulties in speech as well as “a marked reversion of savage characteristics, a marked emotional explosiveness and ideational crudity.” Myers suggested that the right brain, with its slow “inferior evolution,” might “retain…traces of that savage ancestry.” This might explain the “comparatively savage character” of certain “supernormal as well as abnormal” states.59

58 Oct 1885, 23.
59 1885c, Oct. 1885, 21–24.
He argued that the presence of evolutionary throwbacks in such right-brain activity should not make humans ashamed, but rather be a source of pride in that it might demonstrate the speed of human evolution: “For those who believe that our evolution has no assignable limit, there may even be something pleasing in such a token as this of the rapidity with which we are mounting on the endless way.” He did not clarify whom he meant by “those who believe,” but I suggest he may be referring to a general humanistic progress narrative espoused by Pico della Mirandola and Nicholas of Cusa, or to Darwin himself, who had proposed “no limit” to the possibilities of natural selection. Myers continued to hold to the concept of an evolutionary lag between the hemispheres, and later proposed that ambidexterity was a sign of evolutionary progress.

But recovery of “savage” talents was only half of Myers’s double-pointing arrow. His mature evolutionary system also pointed towards the future. It drew on analogy with the spectrum of visible light, with red pointing towards the “infrared” evolutionary and primitive past as well as the subliminal, and violet towards the “ultraviolet” future and the supernormal. Myers would later go on to locate telepathy primarily on the ultraviolet end of the spectrum. But he saw all unusual abilities as related in some sense.

Myers proposed that the talents and senses might have originally developed out of a “primal germ” possessing panaesthesia, “undifferentiated sensory capacity,” which developed over time into various organs of sensing, “an X of some sort,” as Kripal calls it. The notion of primal germs or seeds, as we have seen, was common in earlier evolutionary systems. Myers’s germ differed from William Harvey’s seventeenth-century

60 1885c, Oct. 1885, 24.
61 1893a, 6.
62 See Myers 1891, 328.
63 2010, 69.
preformation theory, in which individuals existed in miniature inside one another, or Chambers’s more sophisticated notion of “particles of organized matter.” But it also appears related to Blavatsky’s “germ of life” and her description in Isis of souls as having a “rudiment of inner sense” and “partaking in degree of all the attributes of the demiurgic power.”  

Myers used the scientific language of his day, “protoplasm,” to discuss how panaesthesia may have worked. He argued that each of the sensitivities he studied, for example, acute sight or hearing, “will thus represent one of the n original capacities of protoplasm, of which capacities a small proportion only may have been developed into definiteness by the training which protoplasm has up to this date undergone.”

Myers used panaesthesia as a jumping-off point for far-reaching speculation that brings to mind the endowment of “mind” by Blavatsky’s demiurges. He described the talents latent in this germ as “faculties which may either be the mere by-products of terrene evolution, or on the other hand may form an essential part of the faculty with which the human germ or the human spirit is originally equipped, for the purpose of self-development in a cosmical, as opposed to a merely planetary, environment.” This speculation of course goes far beyond a naturalistic explanation of human phenomena and into a larger, overarching attempt at a Wallace-style evolutionary theism in a post-Darwinian world. It is a type of intelligent design in that it supposes that humans were endowed with a preprogrammed germ of evolutionary potential that permits self-development beyond death. It can also be contextualized in the framework of Victorian

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65 1892a, 340.
66 Myers 1915 1:94, §317, emphasis added.
vitalist science, which accepted possibilities of invisible and ethereal forms according to the principle of continuity.

In context of the discussion of this primal germ, Myers used the term *nisus*, or impulse, in conjunction with evolution. In 1885, he used the word to describe a human capacity for self-improvement. In this sense, it speaks of the origin of such an impulse, and implies an evolutionary jump-start that evokes Wallace’s higher intelligences endowing humans with mind, or the potential or capacity to develop further.

In 1892, Myers sent further, writing of a “Jupiter” as a generic divine force instantiating such capacity.

Then comes into play that agency—call it what you will—the evolutionary nisus—the creative Power—the ‘Jupiter ipse’ [Jupiter himself] implanting in each organism the capacity of developing new faculties under new stress.

As evolution advances, then, we in some sense become more and more awake…by growing adaptation to the more complex needs of life.\(^{67}\)

It also appears to evoke Blavatsky’s Hermetic demigods. In explaining his proposal, Myers did not mention Blavatsky, but rather took pains to show how his modern proposal differed from ancient explanations. He declared that he would not “follow Plato” and assume that the mathematical genius has had prior training “in some ideal world.” He evaluated the question of genius (and hence the larger question of variation and unusual abilities) from the perspective of four possible explanations: (1) Lamarckian; (2) “protoplasmic,” a name he used as a substitute for what he thought was the more

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\(^{67}\) 1892a, 363.
ambiguous term “Darwinism,” (3) Platonic, and (4) an updated Platonism that would take into account evolutionary biology.

He discarded the Lamarckian explanation, which would base genius on inheritance from ancestors, since a genius often did not have stellar family members from whom to inherit. He found the “protoplasmic” (Darwinian) explanation superior to the Lamarckian, but still lacking because the cause of variation was not explained. The Platonic explanation, which would see genius as recollection of talents at a “pre-terrene” time, is also wanting because it omits biological facts, and because of its antiquity.  

Myers proposed a fourth option, “in some sort a renewal of the old Platonic ‘reminiscence,’” which allowed a protoplasm that was inherently adaptable to all future possibilities.

The magnificently adaptable protoplasm had developed in a “pre-terrene” environment. It incorporated talents like telepathy or mathematical genius that might not have provided advantages in the struggle for existence but lay dormant, waiting for a random awakening when a “sport” of nature, a “vent hole was opened at this one point between the different strata of his being, and a subliminal uprush carried his computative faculty into the open day.”  

The notion of “subliminal uprush” would, we shall see, have staying power in developing psychological paradigms.

Myers did not claim to know the precise future of the human. He speculated, in Human Personality, that “[w]e may reasonably conjecture that the race will continue to change with increasing rapidity, and through a period in comparison with which our

68 1892a, 357. 
69 1892a, 358. 
70 Myers 1892a, 359. This passage is repeated in Myers 1915 1:118–19, §341. Myers also described genius as “an uprush of subliminal faculty” before the SPR, as quoted in 1901, 195.
range of recorded history shrinks into a moment. The actual nature of these coming changes, indeed, lies beyond our imagination.”

His mature version of spiritual evolution, described in the epilogue to *Human Personality*, went beyond the material but stopped short of a sixth or seventh root race or a Neoplatonic return to original divine status. He identified “spiritual evolution” as “our destiny, in this and other worlds;—an evolution gradual with many gradations, and rising to no assignable close.”

Improvement without end has taken the place of preordained reunion with God.

Before we go on to demonstrate how Myers went from pioneering work in early psychology to proposing a new vision of human destiny and salvation, we will spend some time investigating the development of his notion of the role of the secondary self in healing, and of therapy as salvation. As we have seen, therapy as salvation played an important role in Roszak’s twentieth-century typology of evolution as self-improvement. And Myers is a much more likely conduit for this idea than Blavatsky, whose ambivalence on the topic of psychic powers we have reviewed. Myers, it turns out, had no such concerns.

**Healing as Therapy**

Myers was certainly not the first to note that healings occasionally accompanied the phenomena of spiritualism, or that mediums might also be known as healers. In 1871, Wallace included healing in a list of the “mental” phenomena of spiritualism, and affirmed his own belief in both healing via “mesmeric” methods and the laying on of 

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71 1915 1:34 §200.
72 Myers 1915, 2:281 §1003, emphasis added.
hands, as well as mediumistic diagnosis of a “hidden malady.” Hardinge Britten, as mentioned, had briefly worked as a practitioner of “galvanic medicine.” Blavatsky connected Paracelsus and “theurgy” with mesmerism, healing, and “psychology.” She also viewed mesmerism in a “dual sense of a physical and spiritual phenomenon” and predicted a recovery of lost healing arts.

Mesmerism arose out of the eighteenth-century work of Franz Mesmer, who had initially developed his “animal magnetism” as a healing system. Although mesmerism was abandoned by medical authorities at the end of the eighteenth century, many continued to experiment with it. In the 1840s, the Scottish physician James Braid, having removed some of the more objectionable aspects of its practice, rebranded a system of mesmeric techniques as “hypnosis.” It was common in both mesmerism and hypnosis for companion phenomena such as telepathy and precognition to appear, in addition to healing.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Myers would take an interest in hypnosis. During the 1880s in France, Germany, and England, psychologists and physicians used hypnosis to help those afflicted with mental and physical disorders. But they were hardly united in their opinion as to the therapeutic possibilities of hypnotism. In From Mesmer to Freud, Adam Crabtree details the transformation of ideas about mesmerism from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Myers conducted his own experiments with hypnosis and also observed and commented on the work of French psychologists, including the pioneers Janet and

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73 Wallace 1874, 795–96.
74 1960 (1877), 1:84, 335.
Charcot and others at the Paris Salpêtrière. The experiments ranged from the therapeutic to the absurd, as attempts were made not only to study the healing effects of hypnotic suggestion, but also to determine whether hypnotized individuals could engage in self-destructive or harmful behavior. Patients were induced to perform actions of which their conscious selves were unaware, and to exhibit physical phenomena such as insensibility to pain, control of bleeding, and changes in the appearance of wounds and blisters. In his commentary and observations on these cases, Myers developed a theory that the phenomena of hypnosis might reveal something essential about the human mind and capacity of both sick and well individuals—in other words, that “supernormal” or “evolutive” phenomena might be related in some way to “dissolutive” and even “morbid” phenomena. Both might emerge by “paths of externalization” that were “similar.”

His observations led him to take a stand against the position of the French psychologists. He argued that all of their explanations for the phenomena of hypnosis were “insufficient.” Those of the Paris school, including Charcot, assumed that hypnotism was a disease and that “its phenomena are morbid incidents which may be developed in the course of hysteria and other nervous degenerations.” Another group, the school centered around the city of Nancy, was more optimistic about hypnosis but less curious about its possible mechanism. Myers applauded the Nancy group for observing that hypnotism was not a “morbid phenomenon, but is producible in sane and healthy men.” However, he critiqued them for their lack of curiosity as to its mode of operation, in putting it all down to “suggestion.”

76 1887b, 213.
77 Myers 1891, 300–301. This was one of numerous statements he made in opposition to the view of hypnotism as associated with illness. In 1887, he had written: “And here I must repeat my protest,—a protest which the writings of the school of the Salpêtrière seem to me to render constantly needful,—
Myers, on the other hand, concluded that hypnosis was therapeutically useful, and connected its phenomena with his overall system. He argued that psychotherapy and hypnotism were “establishing themselves as a recognized and advancing method of relieving human ills.” The ability of hypnosis to act in controlling pain suggested to Myers a backwards-pointing arrow of evolution. Individuals were tapping latent rudimentary and self-healing talents akin to the amoeba, worm, or crab. “How do we know that any psychical acquisition is ever wholly lost?” He also proposed that “hypnotic experiments” gave insight into the internal workings of the human mind and senses.

He had observed the therapeutic use of hypnotism to alleviate headaches and depression, had received reports of therapeutic responses to vivid dreams and visions, and had seen it promote a change of personality for the better. In addition, he observed that an alternate personality that emerged under hypnosis might possess faculties that the sick individual did not, and that the “unconscious self” might prove “superior to the conscious self in faculty of one kind,” suggesting that a second self might promote “evolution” as well as “dissolution” of the personality. This developing theory was

against the assumption that hypnotism itself, and its attendant phenomena, have of necessity anything morbid about them. Hypnotism has grave incidental dangers of its own, and it is often witnessed in high perfection on morbid subjects; but to call hypnotism a névrose seems to me about as reasonable as to call the act of dreaming a névrose, or the object of hard study.” He also urged that the phenomena not be viewed “from a clinical point of view alone” (1887b, 245).

80 1892a, 375.
81 He documented instances of moral improvement coming through hypnotic suggestion and acknowledged that, while “bad men” could employ hypnotism “for bad ends,” these problems could be averted and that “the trance has, in good hands, a moralizing efficacy of great value—that it is a means not only to the advancement of knowledge, but to the improvement of character” (Oct 1885, 11). He suggested that the brain’s “inhibitive power” could be strengthened and that people might be made “virtuous by hypnotic suggestion” (Oct 1885, 16). He proposed that “curative methods” might be made more localized and specialized by scientific practice over time (Oct 1885, 19).
82 1887b, 246.
much more evidenced-based than Blavatsky’s blanket dismissal of mediums as “sick-sensitives.”

Myers thought the sensitives might reveal something about human potential. He had begun by the 1890s to connect his theory of the subliminal self with a higher vision of human destiny in which a “subliminal consciousness” played a central role. The idea that an alternate consciousness—indeed, one or more alternate personalities—might play a role in healing dated back at least to the eighteenth century experiments of Mesmer. Myers argued that in spite of the “strangeness and grotesqueness” of hypnotic phenomena, there were cases in which the “subliminal will...has insisted on employing its own faculties.”

Myers’s grand proposal regarding hysteria, contra the French psychologists, was as follows. So-called hysterical diseases are “self-suggestions of an irrational and hurtful kind. They are diseases of the hypnotic stratum. Hypnotism is not a morbid state; it is the manifestation of a group of perfectly normal but habitually subjacent powers.” He acknowledged that it would be “unpleasing to many minds” to “deduce from...quasi-hysterical phenomena an argument for man’s higher destinies,” but proposed that an “individuality” existed beneath all the personalities, and that the term “subliminal consciousness” be used to describe the full range of “psychical activity,” and thus that the “spectrum of consciousness...is in the subliminal self indefinitely extended at both ends.”

At the physiological end, it incorporated “rudimentary” material, much of it
conditioned by the “struggle for existence,” while at the “superior or psychical end,” it included an “unknown category of impressions,” including “telepathic and clairvoyant impressions.” The so-called “superior limit” of consciousness might not exist, but be “merged in some vaster and unknown form of life.” He suggested that if psychological experimentation with hypnosis were to continue, it might discover untold possibilities for “an ascending curve” of human “powers over our own personal mind and matter.” He concluded that the soul is more easily accessed in hypnotic states, and these permit it to “more easily modify the body.”

Although he did periodically engage in unscientific speculation regarding the soul, he also continued to assert his allegiance to empirical approaches. He called for the testing of his theory and declared that the “subliminal self” was by no means “free from disturbance and disease,” any more than the supraliminal. But he did connect the new therapeutic possibilities with evolution, writing that just as physicians watch for signs of disease, so psychologists ought to watch for “extensions of capacity—to recognize evolution,” and pay attention to the “confused knowledge” that occasionally emerged from buried strata of consciousness in diseased individuals, bearing in mind that “properly directed excavation” might provide more systematic understanding of latent human capacities. And thus his argument began to trend towards the union of psychotherapy and salvation.

Referencing Wallace’s higher intelligences, he proposed an intelligent design

87 1891, 311.
88 1915, 1:217, §581.
89 1891, 308.
90 1891, 316.
origin for the talents that arose from subliminal depths. He called these talents “‘gifts’ whose brilliance and strangeness have prompted Mr. Wallace’s suggestion that they may have been introduced into the human mind, or fostered there, by some agency like that of a breeder or gardener, outside of the normal course of evolution.”

In *Human Personality*, he elaborated on the connection between therapy and salvation. Writing in a Paracelsan vein, he described a “*vis medicatrix Naturae,*” or “healing power of nature” as “the inmost secret of the human organism,” a sort of self-correcting power that led him to define hypnotism as a way of energizing “Life,” a term he capitalized in a vitalist sense.

In 1893, in support of his salvific and evolutionary interpretation of hypnotic phenomena, he speculated that “those sensitives who, without injury to normal health or capacities, can exercise an easier commerce than is open to most of us with their own subliminal selves” represented an “improved” plan of “psychical structure.” Thus he proposed that a Mr. Keulemans, an artist and lucid dreamer, while not “wiser than Charles Darwin,” belonged to “an advanced, a forward-pointing type” of human being. So-called “sensitives” might incorporate a wide range of capacity—Myers pointed to the great variation among cases of the “hysterical” type and advised against lumping a Saint Theresa of Avila or a Rousseau with “some dead-alive inmate of the Salpêtrière.” He argued that hysterics might have access to a secret power that could point the way for all, as implied in a French proverb, *Les hystériques mènent le monde,* or “hysterics lead the world.”

In support of his thesis that hysterics are forerunners of evolution, he also
referenced an article by Breuer and Freud that observed “among hysteric we find the
clearest-minded, the strongest-willed, the fullest of character, the most acutely critical
specimens of humanity.” 94 Whereas Freud, of course, went on to abandon the use of
hypnosis as a therapeutic tool, Myers at this stage found him a welcome ally in support of
his views.

In the end, Myers connected his results (perhaps too quickly) with overall destiny.
The lesson to be learned from those evolutionary forerunners was that by “‘self-
reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,’ man may become the ruler of his own spirit, and
the fashioner of his fate.” 95 In other words, if properly harnessed, the subliminal self
could be a tool of healing as well as evolutionary personal improvement.

He proposed that subliminal suggestion is analogous not to supraliminal “suasion”
but to prayer, “an empirical facilitation of our absorption of spiritual energy or
acquisition of directive force from a metetherial environment,” in other words, from the
transcendental world postulated to exist beyond the ether. 96 He went on to lay out a
program for a new type of religion. He declared that this explanation could encompass
mind-cure, the miracles of Lourdes, and “ordinary hypnotic practice,” while leaving open
the door to: “the possibility of a world-wide faith, or set of the human spirit, which may
make for an ever more potent mastery over organic hindrance and physical ill.” 97

He continued with a prescription for salvation by this new evolutionary religion:

“Let the great currents of belief run gradually into a deeper channel. Let men realise that

94 1893a, 7, citing Breuer and Freud Neurologisches Central-blatt, January 15, 1893, 44.
95 1891, 355, quoting from Tennyson’s 1831 poem “Oenone.”
96 See Myers 1915 1:xix. For more on Victorian conceptions of the ether, see Lodge 1909. Oliver Lodge,
who was one of the developers of radio technology, was an acquaintance of Myers, and wrote both popular
and scientific works about ether as a material substance; Myers’s system postulated a metetherial world that
was outside of or higher than ether.
97 1915, 1:219 §583.
their most comprehensive duty, in this or other worlds, is intensity of spiritual life; nay, that their own spirits are co-operative elements in the cosmic evolution, are part and parcel of the ultimate vitalizing Power.”

In cementing this connection between healing, expansion of psychic powers, and evolutionary progress, in making healing part of the spiritual life and that a duty, he was performing influential theological work. This leads us to a closer read of his mature soteriology, which will conclude with an evaluation of its similarities and differences with the thought of Sinnett and Blavatsky.

*The Double-Pointed Arrow of Myers’s Mature Soteriology*

The crux of Myers’s mature soteriology is his attempt to draw his thoughts on evolution into harmony with his own developing attitudes towards religious truth, as if he himself became the cord or middle link drawing together the two ends of the great chain, which had been broken apart by developments in biology and historical-critical approaches to religion. His mature system incorporates elements of perennialism as well as the notion of advanced humans as guides and wayshowers and an arrow of evolutionary “progress” that ultimately, in his system, points both backwards and forwards. Much as with Blavatsky’s great arc, the way up is also the way down. Myers’s system also incorporates a rich narrative of approaches to evolution as salvation, including the pursuit not only of therapeutic activities but also the arts. And it incorporates his thoughts about implications for moral life, along with a more immanentist narrative that challenges Theosophical asceticism.

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98 1915, 1:219 §583.
Human Exceptionalism and the Nature of the Soul

Myers’s anthropology, his model of the soul, grew out of an attempt to reconcile natural selection with his sense of human uniqueness. He built upon the idea (also promoted by Blavatsky and Hardinge Britten) that human beings were exceptional in evolutionary history in that their progress in mind and culture had outstripped the transformation of their bodies, which (it was argued) had remained virtually unchanged for the past thirty thousand years. Thus human ancestors were exceptional, acquiring new skills quickly based on their achievements of civilization (an argument also found in Wallace). Myers wrote, in Human Personality, “Man’s ancestors must have varied faster than any animal’s, since they have travelled farthest in the same time. They have varied also in the greatest number of directions; they have evoked in greatest multiplicity the unnumbered faculties latent in the irritability of a speck of slime.”

He continued to paint a picture of human exceptionalism, of “man” who having “gone furthest both in differentiation and in integration” and:

called into activity the greatest number of those faculties which lay potential in the primal germ,—and he has established over those faculties the strongest central control. The process still continues. Civilization adds to the complexity of his faculties; education helps him to their concentration. It is the direction of a still wider range, a still firmer hold, that his evolution now must lie. I shall maintain that this ideal is best attained by the man of

99 1915, 1:76–77 §306.
The genius, like the artist Mr. Keulemans, emerges in Myers’s system to take the place of Blavatsky and Sinnett’s adept as wayshower and round-skipper. Myers contrasted the “genius” with a hypothetical “normal” human, whom he defined as one with “the fullest grasp of faculties which inhere in the whole [human] race.” The man of “genius,” on the other hand, is one who “receives the upward message of his submerged self” and “tends towards the employment of the whole range of his faculty.”

Using terminology that also evoked Sinnett and his rounds, he drew an analogy of an “evolutionary track” similar to a racetrack:

I am urging, then, that where life is concerned, and where, therefore, change is normality, we ought to place our norm somewhat ahead of the average man, though on the evolutionary track which our race is pursuing. I have suggested that that evolutionary track is at present leading him in the direction of greater complexity in the perceptions which he forms of things without, and of greater concentration in his own will and thought.

His narrative of progress and “greater complexity” would, of course, not have been out of place in Victorian era evolutionary biology, with Spencer’s association of evolution with increased heterogeneity (complexity) and even Darwin’s attention to culture and mental habits. It also evokes Chambers’s progress towards perfection and the legacy of great

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100 1915, 1:76–77 §306.
101 1915, 1:20 §120.
102 1915, 1:77 §306.
In addition, Myers’s anthropology is also indebted to, or respectful of, both Neoplatonism and Eastern religion. It emerged in the 1890s, at least five years after the split with the Theosophists, but it contains elements related to Asian religion and Theosophy, such as reincarnation and a valorization of Buddhism, which seem most likely to have come through Sinnett. Myers also connected his study of genius with something very like Sinnett’s advanced soul and round-skipper. At least by 1893, he had suggested that reincarnation or transmigration made more sense than other models of soul origins. He felt that his psychical research demonstrated that human beings must have pre-existed their current forms, and he wrote that transmigration seemed the most realistic of the four possibilities for the genesis of the soul (as compared to creation, traducion, and infusion). He found the idea of a separate creation for each soul “impossible to suppose.”

Having settled on a soul, and one that could probably transmigrate, he went with a much simpler system than had Blavatsky, with her seven-part anthropology; but his soul emerges as certainly more powerful and independent than in Christian theology. Myers championed the survival of the soul and “Ego” after death, declaring that the SPR research had uncovered “traces of faculty” necessitating “the existence of a spiritual world,” which proved that “the Ego can and does survive—not only the minor disintegrations which affect it during earth-life—but the crowning disintegration of bodily death.” The “evidence” that Myers often referred to in his writing included a body of often impressive cases of telepathy, precognition, retrocognition, and veridical...
messages from some extraordinary mediums that were collected by the SPR, some of which do suggest survival of death as the most logical explanation.\textsuperscript{105}

Rather than divide the soul into decaying and nondecaying portions as Blavatsky had, Myers settled on the Neoplatonic model of a human soul as a fragment of the larger hypostasis of divine Soul. Thus, the “supraliminal” or “conscious” self is but “a fragment of a larger Self,” a portion of a “more comprehensive consciousness, a profounder faculty, which for the most part remains potential only so far as regards the life of earth, but from which the consciousness and the faculty of earth-life are mere selections, and which reasserts itself in its plenitude after the liberating change of death.”\textsuperscript{106} Here we have the germ potential expanded into life after death.

During life, it was not the conscious self but the subliminal self that was most akin to the transcendent and larger Self. In \textit{Human Personality}, he described the subliminal self as “something persistent, principal, unitary; appearing at last as the deepest and most permanent representative of man’s true being.”\textsuperscript{107} He also wrote of an “obscure but indisputable” relation “between the subliminal and the surviving self.” And he developed his own explanations for the bizarre, sordid, and often poor quality productions of mediums. They were not, as Blavatsky had supposed, the products of decaying shells; they might primarily be products of the medium’s subconscious, but if not, they indicated simply that souls beyond the grave are not omniscient.

Contrast Myers’s explanation with that of Wallace, who maintained that

\textsuperscript{105} See Hamilton (2009) and Blum (2006) for a more complete description of the nineteenth-century SPR research.
\textsuperscript{106} 1915, 1:15 §112; 1:12 §111. Myers stated that he first compared the subliminal self to a larger self fourteen years earlier, for example in Myers 1887b, PSPR 4:256.
\textsuperscript{107} 1915, 1:220 §600.
consistency was to be found among mediums. While Myers’s explanation is more comprehensive than Wallace’s, it, too, runs into logical difficulty. If the soul after death is more in touch with the subliminal self, might it not be expected to be more knowledgeable than the productions of most mediums suggested? Myers did not acknowledge or fully resolve the tension between support for soul progress after death and the variegated productions of mediums. And although the clashes in his model are less obvious than in Blavatsky’s, they are still apparent.

What is Salvation? Evolution and Psychology, Art, Future Life

Myers’s mature system altered the meaning of salvation in profound ways. It incorporated beauty and art in ways that evoke Renaissance humanism, but transformed by an empirical orientation and the language of nineteenth-century psychology. It also affirmed the transformative effects of will power and the imagination by incorporating vitalist themes from the mind cure movement. As Myers refined his notion of the subliminal self and its role in salvation as evolution, he also drew upon his evaluation of phenomena related to sleep.

Sleep suggested to him that we live simultaneously in spiritual and material worlds and that sleep draws the soul closer to the spiritual world. He connected his theory with our evolutionary past, observing that primitive animals, like babies, spend most of their time asleep. He theorized that the waking personality developed in response to the struggle for survival, which compelled the human to live more in the alert social state and to relate to the external world. Thus, “natural selection” or evolution itself could be
blamed for narrowing the spectrum of human consciousness.\textsuperscript{108} Note that Blavatsky’s early races are “mindless.” Both portrayals are addressing earlier and more primitive states.

Myers connected sleep, and the attendant powers of the hypnotic state, with the vestigial narrative. Powers related to sleep, he argued, though they may have atrophied and become dormant, could be cultivated through hypnotic suggestion, which might increase “the proportion of the sleeping to the waking phase of life.” He developed the notion that organisms require a replenishment of the “energy” of the “unseen world” (why or how can’t yet be determined), but he related it to our evolutionary past.\textsuperscript{109} As he continued to argue along these lines, a more clear outline of hypnotism and therapy as evolution and salvation began to emerge, enhanced with reference to the recovery of the powers of sleep, another metaphor enhancing the backward-pointing arrow of progress as retrogression—is not sleep, after all, a form of return to infancy and the womb?

Myers proposed an “essential concordance between all views—spiritual or materialistic—that ascribe to any direction of attention or will any practical effect upon the human organism,” drawing a parallel between the claimed effect of prayer and of suggestion in hypnotism. His hypothesis was: “there will be effective therapeutical or ethical self-suggestion whenever by any artifice subliminal attention to a bodily function or to a moral purpose is carried to some unknown pitch of intensity which draws energy from the metetherial world.”\textsuperscript{110}

He asked how to define this “saving faith,” and quickly declared that it must

\textsuperscript{108} 1915, 1:21 §121.
\textsuperscript{109} 1915, 1:151–52 §431.
\textsuperscript{110} 1915, 1:218 §582.
“begin as the purification, the intensification, of the purest, the intensest beliefs to which human minds have yet attained,” invoking “the whole strength of all philosophies, of all religions,” for “if one faith is true, all faiths are true; in so far at least as human mind can grasp or human prayer appropriate the unknown metetherial energy, the inscrutable Grace of God.”\(^\text{111}\)

And yet he was not seeking simply to affirm religious views. For him, both religion and art represented higher-order domains that might not have evolutionary value but were an important component of evolutionary salvation. He tried to show that “the evolutionary scheme itself, when more closely considered, points to a wider than planetary scope,”\(^\text{112}\) and thus a greater purpose than survival. He argued that the “loftier” faculties, the “by-products” of human struggle, such as art, music, philosophy (phenomena that Darwin had struggled to explain from an evolutionary standpoint) are “precisely as much in the central stream of evolution” as skills needed for survival. Further, they are “an intrinsic part of that ever-evolving response to our surroundings which forms not only the planetary but the cosmic history of all our race.”\(^\text{113}\)

Myers also developed a line of argument suggesting that individuals should experiment to extend their capacities. “Is there reason to hope that any experiment we can make, any artifice which we can use, will be able to extend our internal vision, as telescope and microscope have extended the external?” By such statements, he encouraged ordinary people (not just elite adepts) to pursue the development of psychic powers. And he ventured to hope that “these sensory and motor automatisms…shall

\(^{111}\) 1915, 1:219 §583.  
\(^{112}\) 1915, 1:94 §318.  
\(^{113}\) 1915, 1:96 §320.
guide us among the inward palace-halls which hold the hope of our race.” Sensitive, like the hysterics of the French proverb, were leading the way to future human evolution.

A Backwards-Forwards Open-Ended Teleology

As already suggested in several quotations, Myers was at first ambiguous about the direction of the evolutionary arrow, and had initially classified telepathy on the infrared, rudimentary talent end of his spectrum before moving it to the supernormal and ultraviolet end. Myers was aware of the contradictions and, in fact, by 1892, had proposed some sort of double-pointing arrow. In a paper presented in London before the International Congress of Experimental Psychology, he reviewed evidence of subliminal faculties, and presented his infrared (organic) and ultraviolet (supersensory) spectrum.

He then proposed that hypnotic suggestion could be used to awaken the infrared layers, where “subliminal perceptions and powers” resided, while telepathy and clairvoyance lay beyond the violet end. However, he noted, “observe...that the two subliminal prolongations of my imaginary spectrum—say the phenomena of power over organic processes, and of clairvoyance—do in fact approach each other, instead of lying more and more widely apart, so that my spectrum ought to be imagined as circular, not linear, and with the infra-red and ultra-violet regions running into each other in some deeply hidden way.” Such a circular formation evokes a type of spiral progression as in Sinnett’s round of towers.

In 1892, Myers also engaged in speculation that elaborated on a backwards-forwards motion of evolution. “As evolution advances, then, we in some sense become

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114 1892b, 534–35.
115 Myers 1892b, 438–39, emphasis added.
more and more awake…by growing adaptation to the more complex needs of life. But nevertheless we retain the habit of reversion to our primitive phase of personality.”

This speculation suggests that evolutionary systems that use a metaphorical arrow pointing both backwards and forwards may have done so not out of metaphysical confusion, but because they originate in philosophies of emanation and return, which they are struggling to harmonize metaphorically with a unidirectional biological evolution, as we will explore in the next chapter. But it appears that the directional confusion in Roszak’s evolutionary system is baked in—that evolution lies both in the past and in the future—not only insofar as it relied on Blavatsky’s root races, but also as it drew from the influences of Myers, and ultimately from the Neoplatonism that had influenced them both.

It seemed to Myers not of so much importance to determine the direction of evolutionary “progress,” whether as return to the intent of the designer of the primal germ or to continue development along a linear matrix. His teleology is of a weak sort which, like the Renaissance humanist systems, sought to preserve human autonomy. In Human Personality, he returned to the “often-quoted analogy” of human to insect or grub, which holds within it “something of the imago or perfect insect,” such as rudiments of wings. This “well-worn simile” suggested to him that:

[F]or a long time yet it must be on the future as much as on the past, on what is now in process of evolution as much as on what has already been evolved, that the attention of psychologists should be fixed. We are watching the

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116 1892b, 363.
emergence of unguessed potentialities from the primal germ. The mind is no walled plot which a diagram will figure; it is a landscape with lines which stretch out of view, and an ever-changing horizon.117

Writing in the nineteenth century, Myers could not describe human destiny as a simple return to original divine form or status. Rather, it must also incorporate elements of human agency, progress, and a creation in which humans, like Hermetic demigods, might also participate. These musings probably opened the door to Aldous Huxley’s later portrayal of the “almost endless potentialities of the human mind,” which foreshadowed the human potential movement.118

The future life as described by Myers incorporates an updated vision of the great chain, along with Swedenborgian and spiritualist concepts. 119 Myers, like Swedenborg, also used the principle of continuity to support his theories. In an attempt to explain cases of precognition, he wrote, “I imagine that the Continuity of the Universe is complete; and that therefore the hierarchy of intelligences between our minds and the World-Soul is infinite; and that somewhere in that ascent a point is reached where our conception of time loses its accustomed meaning…. The reader will judge…whether…we find…some

118 Quoted in Kripal 2007, 88.
119 Myers developed his own skeptical but appreciative view of Swedenborg, unlike Warren Felt Evans, who had accepted him more uncritically. Myers rather judiciously acknowledged Swedenborg while also realizing his shortcomings. He characterized Swedenborg’s “trance-revelations” as a “strange mixture…of slavish literalism with exalted speculation, of pedantic orthodoxy with physical and moral insight.” He praised Swedenborg for having viewed the “unseen world” as a “realm of law,” and not “of mere emotional vagueness or stagnancy of adoration, but of definite progress according to definite relations of cause and effect.” He regarded Swedenborg “not…as an inspired teacher, nor even as a trustworthy interpreter of his own experiences,—but yet as a true and early precursor of that great inquiry which it is our present object to advance” (1915, 1:6 §105). Myers constructed a future life that resonated with his own philosophical and scientific situatedness in the nineteenth century and was far removed from the biblical shackles that had confined Swedenborg. But he certainly built upon Swedenborg’s notions of self-created destiny after death and of eternal progress.
trace of a Cosmic Mind.”

And in *Human Personality*, he continued to incorporate continuity and great chain metaphors into his theology. Building upon Wallace’s connection of evolution and communication with “superior lives,” Myers drew from a “presumption of continuity” an almost Hermetic notion that the higher links of the chain depend upon the lower. He wrote:

Learning how close a tie in reality unites man with inferior lives [i.e., animals]—once treated as something wholly alien, impassably separated from the human race—we are led to conceive that a close tie may unite him also with superior lives,—that the series may be fundamentally unbroken, the essential qualities of life the same throughout. It used to be asked whether man was akin to the ape or to the angel. I reply that the very fact of his kinship with the ape is proof presumptive of his kinship with the angel.121

In other words, each link in the chain *requires* the upper and the lower.

Myers here seems possibly to reference or comment on spiritualist conceptions of the necessity to divine purpose of both experience on earth and of progress after death.122

Hardinge Britten’s 1876 *Art Magic* provides a similar narrative that evokes the Hermetic description referenced earlier—that divine spirit requires life in order to obtain self-

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120 1893b, 340.
121 1915, 1:242 §628.
122 Frank Podmore, a member of the Society for Psychical Research, made his own use of the great chain metaphor in a book on spiritualism. As cited by Lavoie, Podmore, describing the thought of Heinrich Werner, described as descending from an immaterial God “an infinite chain from seraph to grain of sand, form [sic] highest self-conciousness to most absolute unconsciousness, each link in the chain having more of earth intermixed with its spiritual nature than that which went before. The soul of man occupies some intermediate position in this universal procession” (cited in Lavoie 2012, 185).
knowledge—although it omits reference to the lower animal links:

The means whereby the spirit-dweller of the original Eden becomes the perfected Angel of a celestial heaven, are: mortal birth, a pilgrimage through spheres of trial, discipline, and purification, and an organism made up of separate parts with appropriate functions [including sexual organs] the due and legitimate exercise of which constitute the methods of progress. In such a scheme, every trial and suffering has its meaning, and every passion (even the tendencies to vice and crime), their use in shaping the rudimental Angel, through remorse and penalty, into ultimate strength and divine proportion.\(^{123}\)

As the passage continued, Hardinge Britten elaborated her notion of soul progress: “To become an Angel [the soul] must first be a Man, then a Spirit, struggling on through spheres of graduated unfoldment, and when all is done, the Soul originally expelled from its Eden of innocence and ignorance will regain it with the strength, wisdom and love which alone can constitute it an Angel of God.”\(^{124}\)

Hardinge Britten was unwilling to definitively link up apes and angels by way of humans, but her narrative probably had some influence on Myers’s more confident reconstitution of the chain. He, friend to Wallace as well as rationalists and skeptics, was all too ready to link ape with angel, as had Chambers before him, not realizing how quaint the comparison would come to seem in succeeding centuries. Linking ape with angel, for Myers, did not fix evolution as unidirectional or rule out an emanationist

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\(^{123}\) 2011, 75. See also 2011, 26, for Hardinge Britten’s thoughts on the need for sexual reproduction.  
\(^{124}\) 2011, 75.
cosmology, since before apes there was protoplasm and before protoplasm the mysterious—perhaps divine Jupiter nisus—evolutionary impulse.

Myers connected the Hermetic ideals (ape proves angel, and perhaps angel requires ape) with an open-ended and participatory vision of scientific truth. Referring to the quest for knowledge, he wrote, “Perhaps, indeed…our own effort is no individual, no transitory thing. That which lies at the root of each of us lies at the root of the Cosmos too. Our struggle is the struggle of the Universe itself; and the very Godhead finds fulfilment through our upward-striving souls.”

His reframing of Hermetic ideals does not reference Hermetic texts, like Blavatsky’s, but it draws on Renaissance humanist language that was also influenced by Hermetic traditions.

Myers also wrestled with a fundamental contradiction in Neoplatonic thought—how to preserve freedom in the face of predestined return to a previous condition. He proposed a benevolent Plotinian “World-Soul” to whose “justly ruling principle” the individual soul would relate in “adoring cooperation,—an eager obedience to whatsoever with our best pains we can discern as the justly ruling principle…without us and within.”

In this passage, he had not made much more progress than Plotinus at preserving freedom during return to a divine source. However, taking this statement in context with his overall vision of the ultimate goal of human existence and progress, it seems most sensible to characterize his teleology as weak and open-ended. At least it attempts to escape the deterministic Neoplotinian return to an original starting point.

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125 1915, 2: 277, §988.
126 Myers 1915, 2:285; 1909, 265.
Myers’s religious synthesis incorporated three main themes: a concern for morality, a perennialist and universal reformulation of Christianity that rejected asceticism, and the assistance in human evolution of wise departed souls. (As mentioned, perennialism proposes that a single true philosophy exists in all cultures and is being continually rediscovered.) The first theme, morality, was a question addressed by most philosophers concerned with the implications of Darwinian natural selection, and Myers took it up in his popular writings on evolution.

One vehicle for his discussion was his description of the thoughts of Prince Leopold, Victoria’s youngest son, who had fretted that materialist science was taking its toll on the “masses,” who were vulnerable to “Russian Nihilism and German Socialism.” Myers, writing his thoughts “In Memoriam” after the prince’s early death, described how Leopold had desired that “the dignitaries of great churches, the leaders of all sections of religious thought, should welcome any prospect of an alliance with scientific discovery, and convert to the upbuilding of the higher life those modern modes of thought which have sometimes been pursued to its prejudice.” Myers described as an obvious truism that there was a “direct…relation between disbelief in a future life and reckless rebellion against the laws and limitations” of existence. Thus Myers felt an imperative to provide an alternative to atheist and materialist viewpoints.

In 1893 he expressed his concern that humans would stop striving if they felt that life was without a purpose: “Is any effort possible to us, or must we drift helplessly with

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the cosmic stream?”128 Myers fretted that many of his contemporaries, including Swinburne and William Morris, saw value only in life on earth and not in a hereafter. However, he declared that he found meaning in the work of those such as Wordsworth and Tennyson who “while accepting to the full the methods and the results of Science, will not yet surrender the ancient hopes of our race” and who accept the “interpenetration” of the spiritual and material worlds.129

For Myers, the existence of a spiritual world, even one outside the realm of traditional religious scripture and doctrine, might allow the salvaging of both morality and purpose in life. These thoughts closely paralleled those of Wallace and the spiritualists. By the 1890s, then, Myers was laying out his vision for progressive evolution as not merely the development of psychic talents but also the improvement of character:

If man is now interacting with a spiritual world, he may act and advance in that world, for aught we know, for ever; and in that case Evolution may be no longer a partial and truncated, but a universal and endless law… If man’s soul grow forever, it matters no more how many solar systems she wears out than how many coats. Nevertheless, to correspond with this expansion without us, there must be an expansion within. If man is to march with the Cosmos, it must be progress and not joy which is his goal.130

The moral imperative behind this somber framework (progress over joy) evokes Sinnett’s

129 1901, 192, 198.
130 1901, 199–200.
endless globes and rounds. It also stands at odds with the more playful and experimental tone of some of Myers’s other writings. But it became one of the structural supports of his attempt to incorporate evolution into a universal religious doctrine that includes not only the pursuit of psychic talents but also moral progress as a byword of salvation.

In this essay Myers referenced Tennyson’s famous poem “By an Evolutionist” (used as an epigraph to my chapter 1), which linked moral progress with a future life in a better form: “The Lord let the house of a brute to the soul of a man,/and the man said ‘Am I your debtor?’/And the Lord—‘Not yet: but make it as clean as you can,/And then I will let you a better.”

Standard religious and Platonic moral prescriptions seem to apply for cleaning this house, a metaphor that puts a moral valence on evolution as salvation. Myers did not lay out a complete system of “house cleaning,” and he certainly declined to endorse standard religious morality.

He laid out his religious system in several pieces of writing, most notably the “Provisional Sketch of a Religious Synthesis,” which he delivered in 1899 before a group known as the Synthetic Society, which was made up of scientists (including Oliver Lodge) and theologians (including Episcopal bishops), who were searching for common ground. This synthesis was also reprinted at the end of Human Personality.

Myers began his “proposed synthesis” by offering hope that the research of the SPR, particularly on telepathy and survival of death, could become a foundation of a “more comprehensive” approach to the “expansion and development” of “religious thought.” He argued that the evidence compiled by the SPR for communication

131 1901, 205.
133 1909, 264.
“beyond the grave” suggested that the state of these departed souls is “one of endless evolution in wisdom and in love.”\textsuperscript{134} These souls do not support any system of “terrene theology” or of “chastisement of fire,” but rather that “self-knowledge is man’s punishment and his reward; self-knowledge, and the nearness or aloofness of companion souls.” Telepathy, he argued, also shows us that the “Communion of Saints,” as Life Everlasting, “is valid for us here and now.”\textsuperscript{135} All this, so far, resonates with garden-variety spiritualism.

With respect to the Christian faith and need for a Savior, Myers was much in line with the nineteenth-century “modern heaven” view. He questioned the notion of a static heaven as “an instant and unchangeable bliss or woe—a bliss or woe determined largely by a man’s beliefs,” i.e. acceptance of Christianity.\textsuperscript{136} He declared that salvation did not stand in a “single act or passion,” a reference to Christ’s sacrifice. He wrote rather of a participatory salvation, “not one Saviour only, but the whole nascent race of man—nay, all the immeasurable progeny and population of the heavens.”\textsuperscript{137}

Although he had dispensed with the uniqueness of Christ as Savior, Myers still saw a need for the core component of Christianity, the Resurrection, which in his view led to universal salvation, not only among declared Christians but those of other faiths. Spiritualist phenomena were “profoundly corroborative of” the Resurrection, in that they proved “the deathlessness of the spirit.” Myers proposed that in the future, people would see Christ’s resurrection as a demonstration of the “cosmic law” of the survival of the soul after death. The “central claim of Christianity is thus confirmed,” Myers argued, but

\textsuperscript{134} 1909, 268–70.  
\textsuperscript{135} 1909, 268–69.  
\textsuperscript{136} 1909, 271.  
\textsuperscript{137} 1909, 274.
its exclusivity is not, for “‘a great sheet has been let down out of heaven’; and lo! neither
Buddha nor Plato is found common or unclean.”138

In other words, the true message of Christianity is of Jesus as exemplar. Myers is here referencing, with the “sheet” being let down out of heaven, Acts 11:1–10, which describes a dream of Peter. In the dream, a sheet containing wild animals is lowered by four corners. Peter is told to eat the animals, since they have been cleansed by God and are therefore are not unclean. The original interpretation of the vision was that Christians could ignore Jewish prohibitions on the consumption of unclean flesh. Myers interpreted it as extending salvation to all, even the non-Christians Buddha and Plato. His allusion could also be interpreted as a reprimand to those who view our animal forebears as “common or unclean.”139 In looking for support for his system of salvation, Myers also referenced Tennyson’s poem “Akbar’s Dream,” which described the attempt by the sixteenth-century Indian Mughal emperor to unite all religions into one.

And as if to debate those who continued to insist on the uniqueness of Christianity, Myers made the following argument, asking if the “uniqueness” of the “Christian revelation” could not be better understood “when we regard it as a culmination rather than an exception?” The original Christian revelation could not be “[i]ntellectually adequate for all coming ages,” given the “evolution, on either side of the gulf of death, of knowledge and power.”140

Myers challenged the orthodox Christian view even further, declaring that “as to our own soul’s future, when that first shock of death is past, it is in Buddhism that we

139 Acts 11:8, KJV.
140 1915, 2:283 §1005, Epilogue.
find the more inspiring, the truer view.” 141 The question remains as to what type of Buddhism he was endorsing here; his description closely mirrors Sinnett’s “esoteric” Buddhism which, as we have seen, did not contain much accurate information about historical Buddhist teachings. Myers tried to harmonize Buddhist description of nirvana as extinction with the Plotinian apotheosis of divinization when he wrote of the goal of soul evolution as: “a consummation so far removed that he who gazed has scarcely known whether it were Nothingness or Deity.” 142 Myers, like Sinnett, clearly preferred to avoid associating nirvana with extinction, and to preserve a progressive model of evolution. 143

For Myers, even extinction or nothingness would not preclude the progressive journey he believed was laid out in the wisdom of the “further East,” which he described as opening to human possibility “the whole range and majesty of human fate,” including a journey through “an almost unimaginable series of worlds.” 144 He went on to rhapsodize about the future divinization of all humans: “us, too, like Buddha, the cosmic welcome may await; as when ‘Earth itself and the laws of all worlds’ trembled with joy

141 1909, 271.
142 1909, 271.
143 Sinnett addressed those who claim that nirvana is extinction, and set forth a Theosophical vision of endless progress. Nirvana, according to him, is above the highest level of form, a “wonderful condition of pure spirituality” (2008 [1883], 167). The “threshold of Nirvāṇa” is achieved by some sixth and seventh round souls who are able to recall all of their past lives and “take cognizance” of “the minutest details” of any past life. “This supreme development of individuality is the great reward which Nature reserves” (168). Nirvana is a condition in which “no state of individual consciousness…can be equal in spiritual elevation to absolute consciousness in which all sense of individuality is merged in the whole…. All that words can convey is that Nirvāṇa is a sublime state of conscious rest in omniscience” (168). Sinnett called the attempt to determine whether Nirvana is “annihilation” to be “ludicrous” (168). He claimed that “there have been many other adepts besides Buddha who have made the great passage” (170). And “Nirvāṇa is truly the keynote of esoteric Buddhism…. The great end of the whole stupendous evolution of humanity is to cultivate human souls so that they shall be ultimately fit for that as yet inconceivable condition” (172).
144 1908, 271. Note: the phrase “an almost unimaginable series of worlds” is in double quotation marks, as are several sentences in the paragraph. Internet searches do not reveal sources for these quotations, and Myers does not include citations. It is possible they are just his own summarizations of various spiritualist, Buddhist, or Theosophical concepts.
‘as Buddha attained the Supreme Intelligence, and entered into the Endless Calm.’”\(^{145}\)

In Myers’s system, how does one “clean” house, so to speak, how beyond the development of psychic talents and the application of imagination and will does one prepare for progress beyond the grave? Myers attacked the dogmatic and institutional nature of organized religion. His new science-based faith was meant to continually renew itself in response to fresh evidence. He suggested that if any priesthood claimed institutional authority in the universal faith he was proposing, that the “claim would promptly carry with it its own refutation,” in that it would be based on authority rather than “on evidence and on reason…by their fruits we shall know them.”\(^{146}\) In Myers’s view, “Science has come not to destroy but to fulfil; Religion must needs evolve into Knowledge.”\(^{147}\)

Myers did offer some further clues as to what kind of behavior could lead to salvation as evolution. He specifically departed from ascetic visions, including Theosophical and Neoplatonic, of how humans on earth should live:

For souls not yet perfected but still held on earth I have foretold a growth in **holiness**. By this I mean no unreal opposition or forced divorcement of sacred and secular, of flesh and spirit. Rather I define holiness as the joy too high as yet for our enjoyment; the wisdom just beyond our learning; the rapture of love which we still strive to attain…. Such devotion may find its flower in **no vain self-martyrdom, no cloistered resignation**, but rather in such pervading

\(^{145}\) 1909, 272. As in the previous passage, the source of Myers’s quotations here is unclear.

\(^{146}\) 1915, 2:309, citing Matt. 7:20.

ecstasy as already the elect have known; the Vision which dissolves for a
moment the corporeal prison-house; “the flight of the One to the One.”

He again made clear his opposition to asceticism in an appendix to Human

Personality called “The Decline of Dogmatism.” He wrote: “There is no place for
monasticism in such a scheme as this. There is no place for the puritanical, the ascetic
spirit; for any belief in merit attaching to suffering or privation as such. The aim of all
will be spiritual, moral, intellectual efficiency; self-preparation for those higher duties
which shall follow on the accomplishment of lower duties as the just and inseparable
reward.”149 Duty and efficiency, performed with joy, then, take precedence over
renunciation, much in line with Myers’s own life, which included his marriage and the
rearing of three children.

These two passages suggest opposition to at least Blavatsky’s ascetic form of
Theosophy. It is not clear how Sinnett may have mellowed his views over time and
through exposure to Myers. There were certainly other contemporaries who also
questioned Sinnett’s early valorization of the ascetic path and neglect for earthly
existence. For example, a satirical rejoinder to Sinnett had been penned by the travel
writer and mystic Laurence Oliphant in 1884, the year after Sinnett’s Esoteric Buddhism
was published in The Nineteenth Century, the same publication in which Myers and
Gurney had published their popular articles. This general interest periodical also covered
more serious topics such as policy towards Ireland, and the possibility of digging a tunnel
to connect Britain and France.

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148 1909, 273, emphasis added.
149 1915, 2:309.
The satirical attack on Sinnett written by Oliphant was entitled “The Sisters of Thibet.” In it, Oliphant claimed to have been the chela of an “adept of Bhuddist [sic.] occultism in Khatmandhu.” Oliphant referred to his own “mahatma brothers” and claimed to have been pushed forward in his own evolution, adopting Sinnett’s language of “rounds”: “Meantime this premature development of my sixth sense forced me right up through the obstacles which usually impede such an operation in the case of a fourth-round man.” Oliphant described his own journeys in his “astral body” in the mountains of Tibet in which he had encountered “a body of female occultists” who were held with “loathing and contempt” by the brothers. He was welcomed by the sisters, whose astral bodies were recognizably female—and lovely—and invited to visit the ageless women in their Shangri-La-style abode, an earthly paradise filled with modern technological conveniences.

Oliphant claimed that after he had returned to London, he was contacted by the sisterhood through astral visitation, and told that they were appalled by the release of *Esoteric Buddhism*. They had therefore “broken their long silence” in order to counteract its misinformation, including its “deleterious metaphysical compounds.” They revealed to Oliphant that Sinnett was not in touch with true Mahatmas, but of a disembodied brotherhood who made fun of Sinnett by sharing with him “fantastic theories” of a “planetary chain, and the spiral advance of the seven rounds…and all the rest of it.”

Oliphant went on to criticize the ascetic stance of the Mahatmas and their

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150 1884, 715.
151 1884, 717.
152 1884, 720–21.
153 1884, 730.
154 1884, 727.
uncomfortability with women, and to promote progressive social action. He derided Sinnett for promoting the development of a “class of idle visionaries who, wrapping themselves in their own vain conceits, would stand by and allow their fellow-creatures to starve to death.” The article itself embodied a feminist retort to the Mahatmas’ ascetic and seemingly male valorizing religion. While it should not be taken as any accurate description of female religious life in Tibet, it certainly was an appeal for a more compassionate, immanent, and active take on religious life, and may have influenced Myers. It also reflects contemporary debates about religion, social activism, and poverty.

But Myers did think along Theosophical lines when it came to his description of future humans. He incorporated adept-like advanced souls who had achieved “a certain scientific level,” those who, like the Hermetic creator gods or the Dhyāni Chohans, assist those they have left behind. In other words, in Myers’s vision, humans “evolving” on earth were being helped from above, or pulled up the chain. Myers wrote of “wise spirits,” i.e., the more advanced among the deceased, who wish to work “in a collaboration with us as close as may be possible,” given that many of them were “our own familiar friends.” They desire to make a “willing contribution to that universal scheme by which the higher helps the lower,” in spite of the “confusion” of communication. Myers offered the hope that psychical research and interaction with departed souls would lead to a “directer communion” so that souls from the beyond “shall teach us all they will.” Beyond a suggestion that these souls included Buddha and

155 1884, 729.
156 See Kraft 2013 for more on gender and Theosophy.
157 1915, 2:274 §987.
158 1915, 2:276 §988.
159 1909, 272–73.
Plato, Myers did not elaborate.

Myers’s system, like those of the spiritualists and Theosophists, ran into trouble when it tried to rely on phenomena as the foundation of a new universal faith. Each system had serious gaps, as if it were trying to link up the halves of the great chain with a rope that was too short. There is no doubt that Myers’s system is more congenial than the Theosophical one, in the sense that it resonated more with progressive and this-worldly faith and a modern heaven, and it was much more plausible in terms of its harmony with natural selection. It did not, like Blavatsky’s, engage in fantastic macrohistorical speculation, other than to suggest talents deriving from a germ planted by higher intelligences. But it was no more able to provide scientific proof of progressive after-death salvation and divinization than the others.

However, Myers’s work was deeply influential in ways that are generally not fully appreciated. His psychical research and his evolutionary synthesis failed to achieve recognition in mainstream history of science, given that psychical research fell out of favor and was divorced from science early in the twentieth century. But his works were widely read and influential in their day, especially in metaphysical and spiritualist circles. Later in the twentieth century, Ellenberger recognized him for his contributions to psychology. And Michael Murphy drew on his theories to promote the pursuit of extraordinary human performance. Even later, the Sursem group at Esalen produced two volumes during the first two decades of the twenty-first century devoted to continuing Meyers’s projects. Of course Kripal has given him a prominent place in his studies of evolutionary esotericisms in the nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty-first centuries.

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A reception history of Myers would shed more light on how his linkage of psychic development, healing, and salvation contributed to later evolutionist visions, including in Roszak’s 1975 typology. Myers’s system avoided most of the problematic components of Blavatsky’s, and elements of his typology bear a greater resemblance to Roszak’s than do Blavatsky’s. The current study now turns to conceptual metaphor theory to evaluate the components of Myers’s and Blavatsky’s systems. In examining how they blended metaphor, it will ask what metaphor theory can tell us about both change and persistence of their evolutionary systems in subsequent decades.

**Table 17: The Evolutionary System of Frederic W. H. Myers**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Humans evolved by a natural process from protoplasm through primates.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Humans differ from animals in the possession of mind and a germ of evolutionary potential for “self-development.”</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The phenomena of mesmerism and hypnosis suggest latent human capacity.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Psychic powers demonstrate the way to future human evolution.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Human evolution takes place both through recovery of animal talents and unfolding latent potential from a primal germ.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Psychic talents can be arranged on a spectrum from subliminal and rudimentary to supernormal. The subliminal and supernormal will meet when fully extended.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>A “subliminal self” is responsible for psychic phenomena and has a therapeutic and “evolutive” nature. It may be superior to the conscious self.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Psychic development is equated with both healing and salvation.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Humans have a duty to pursue psychic development along with healing, the arts, and philosophy.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Advanced humans are templates for all.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>Moral “cleanliness” is also important for salvation, but asceticism is not required, rather a pursuit of joy and ecstasy as “holiness.”</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Transmigration is the most logical explanation for the nature of the human soul.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>The subliminal self merges into a larger Self or “World Soul” after death.</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Soul and ego survive death and “evolve” in knowledge and power on other worlds.</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>Advanced souls monitor and assist those on earth after death.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>The goal of human evolution is not discernable but an “ever-changing horizon.”</td>
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Chapter 8: Conceptual Blending and Salvation = Evolution = Therapy

The Great Chain Metaphor is a tool of great power and scope…. It allows us to comprehend general human character traits in terms of well-understood nonhuman attributes; and, conversely, it allows us to comprehend less well-understood aspects of the nature of animals and objects in terms of better-understood human characteristics.

—Lakoff and Turner 1989¹

A pronghorn antelope running across the North American plains “learned” to run faster when chased by predators, and “remembers” the chase even after those predators have become extinct, so argues a 1998 book by John Byers entitled American Pronghorn: Social Adaptations and the Ghosts of Predators Past. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner set aside the debate in evolutionary biology as to whether individuals can “remember” events that happened to their ancestors, and the role of social adaptation in culture. They use Byers’s theory as an example of how the imagination applies the principles of blending to alter “identity,” which is termed a “vital relation” in conceptual metaphor theory.² The example is sharpened by an illustration that accompanied a review of this book, which showed now-extinct cheetahs chasing a modern pronghorn.³

The example of the pronghorn chased by ghosts shows that even scientific minds engage in metaphorical thinking to explore the theory of evolution, as contemporary

Prophet: Evolution Esotericized

biologists find it useful to compress the identity of past and present individual members of a species. Being able to think about evolution as salvation also requires compression of identity—in this case the actions of multiple members of a group whose actions result in successful propagation of a species over time are compressed and viewed as if the same individual had persisted for hundreds of thousands of years. The compression process is aided, of course, by the concept of a transmigrating soul.

This chapter begins with a general overview of the essential components of conceptual metaphor theory and the constitutive and governing principles of blending, or “conceptual integration,” along with a discussion of the Great Chain of Being metaphor as described by Lakoff and Turner. (The names of metaphors and blends are capitalized in this chapter, as is conventional in metaphor theory.) The overview is followed by a discussion of the specific components of the evolutionary systems examined in this work, and an application of metaphor theory to the question of why some persisted while others were abandoned. Finally, metaphor theory is applied to two specific blends in detail: Salvation is Evolution and Evolution is Therapy.

*Embodied Minds and Conceptual Integration*

Conceptual metaphor theory arises from an intellectual tradition of embodied cognition going back to Aristotle and continuing philosophically through a range of thinkers including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, John Dewey, and Francisco Varela. For more information on the development of the theory, the reader is directed to Lakoff and Johnson’s 1999 *Philosophy in the Flesh*, which includes an abundant list of background resources. Linguists and neuroscientists are continually working to refine and test the
basic assumptions of the theory, and have applied it to social and religious concepts. According to the theory, metaphors are not just literary or linguistic devices, but they actually structure and constrain the way we perceive the world. They are not “arbitrary,” argue Lakoff and Johnson, but they “have a basis in our physical and cultural experience,” even though they may vary from one culture to another.4

A conceptual metaphor is one in which we “systematically use inference patterns from one conceptual domain to reason about another conceptual domain.” The use and meaning of metaphors depends upon the “nature of our bodies, our interactions in the physical environment, and our social and cultural practices.”5 The focus on the body marks a break from earlier philosophical systems. Lakoff and Johnson argue that “we cannot, as some meditative traditions suggest, ‘get beyond’ our categories and have a purely uncategorized and unconceptualized experience.”6 Embodied cognition theory is continuously being refined, but insofar as it suggests that our bodies shape the way we think, it demonstrates that reason is not divorced from the body, as maintained by philosophers since Plato. Ironically, these new developments question the idealist components of Western philosophy, which greatly informed those who developed evolutionary esotericisms in the nineteenth century.

In 1999, Lakoff and Johnson presented their integrated theory of primary metaphor in four parts, which incorporates the work of others. 1) Johnson’s theory of conflation: young children regularly conflate subjective with sensorimotor experiences, i.e., affection with warmth. 2) Joseph Grady’s 1997 theory of primary metaphor: complex

4 1980, 14.
5 Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 246.
6 1999, 19.
metaphors are made up of ‘atomic’ metaphorical parts called *primary metaphors.*” These primary metaphors are acquired “unconsciously through everyday experience” and then develop into “universal (or widespread) conventional conceptual metaphors.”

3) Srini Narayanan’s neural theory of metaphor, concerning the way literal and metaphorical associations may be linked by neural activation.

4) Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of conceptual blending, which describes how cross-domain connections form and lead to new and more complex metaphors.

The way cultures think about religious doctrines such as creation and the afterlife, according to these theories, is fundamentally shaped first by our bodies and second by our cultures. As mentioned, a set of primary conceptual metaphors has been identified and tested cross-culturally, such as More is Up. These are elaborated into a family of metaphors associating good qualities with position, such as Happy is Up. Primary metaphors are combined in more complex religious metaphors like Heaven and Hell.

As Lakoff and Johnson describe it, “the spatial logics of these body-based image schemas are among the sources of the forms of logic used in abstract reasoning.”

Spatial relations are central in a study that deals with a vertical metaphor like the Great Chain of Being, which is variously seen as extending upwards through space from earth into the sky, or as linking forms of life in order of complexity, or providing a ladder on which souls ascend to heaven. Those in a higher, or Up, position are considered more advanced and closer to God. According to Lakoff and Johnson, there are a “relatively small” number of “primitive image schemas that structure systems of spatial relations in the

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7 Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 46, summarizing Grady.
8 1999, 46–47.
9 1999, 36.
world’s languages.” A schema is a way of organizing information categories and their relationships.

This discussion of verticality brings to mind Plato’s scheme that associates the soul with the head because it is higher than the body, and hence closer to the Good. Another primary metaphor that evokes Plato’s worldview is The Nature of an Entity is its Shape. Recall his equation of the shape of the skull with the shape of the cosmos and his use of skull-shape in the Timaeus to rank souls. In addition to equating the rational nature with the ball-shaped head, Plato’s further declaration that animal heads, not being ball-shaped, are reserved for lesser souls, extends this connection of nature and shape.

Complex metaphors can change their inferences over time and allow words to develop polysemy (“systematically related meanings for a single word”) in a way that permits, as Lakoff and Johnson describe, the projection of “inference patterns from one conceptual domain onto another…. [C]onceptual metaphor allows us to reason about the target domain in a way that we otherwise would not.” Polysemy permits us to preserve “in the target domain the inferential structure of the source domain.” For example, the metaphor Love is a Journey was extended in the twentieth century to incorporate new inferences, such as “driving in the fast lane,” which suggests the relationship is developing too quickly, a mapping that would have had no relevance in horse and buggy days.

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10 1999, 35.
12 Tim. 44d, 44e, 45a (Zeyl 1997, 1248).
14 1999, 82.
15 1999, 91.
16 See Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 67.
Complex Metaphors Already at Work in Esoteric Constructions

A metaphor may be conventional and generalized across the entire culture, or community specific. For example, Death is Departure is common across Western culture, but other metaphors, like Life is Bondage, are specific to certain religious communities. We are dealing in this study with the question of polysemy when applied to the term evolution, in the sense that “evolution” is used in some subcultures to describe self-improvement and personal transformation. Metaphor theory has developed a refined approach to subculture-specific application of metaphors. As Lakoff and Turner point out in More than Cool Reason, we use different metaphors for the same entities—for example, Life is a Journey and Life is a Precious Possession. “It is not surprising that source-domain structures used for understanding them are often inconsistent,” they comment, and warn of the need to avoid “simpleminded dichotomies when talking about metaphor.”

A common schema relied on in esoteric systems is that of a path and the accompanying complex metaphor, A Purposeful Life is a Journey, which is rooted in the common linguistic Source-Path-Goal schema. The Source-Path-Goal schema is at the foundation of a number of complex submetaphors that are common in Western culture, such as A Person Living a Life is a Traveler, Life Goals are Destinations, and A Life Plan is an Itinerary. These complex metaphors do not have their own “experiential grounding” but are related to the primary metaphors Purposes are Destinations and Actions Are Motions. The metaphor is more than just a poetic reframing of what “actually” happens in life. Rather, argue Lakoff and Johnson, it expands the

17 1989, 55.
18 See Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 33.
19 See Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 60–62.
“sensorimotor inferential capacity.” Therefore, the metaphor “A Purposeful Life Is a Journey lets us use our rich knowledge of journeys to derive rich inferences about purposeful lives.”

A Purposeful Life is a Journey is common to Western culture but not necessarily to other cultures, which may not place the same value on goals. The notion that life is a journey on a path towards enlightenment is common in many esoteric systems. And esoteric Christianity, with its explicit roots in Neoplatonism, relies on an upward path requiring effort and self-transcendence, even moreso than in traditional Christianity.

I mentioned earlier that the Great Chain of Being is evaluated by Lakoff and Turner as a complex metaphor that consists of several basic metaphors. They argue that it persists in a “highly articulated version” that helps us to understand “ourselves, our world, and our language,” though it has been abandoned in the philosophical history of ideas. Lakoff and Turner present both a basic and an extended version of the metaphor:

The basic Great Chain concerns the relation of human beings to ‘lower’ forms of existence. It is extremely widespread and occurs not only in Western culture but throughout a wide range of the world’s cultures. It is largely unconscious and so fundamental to our thinking that we barely notice it. The extended Great Chain concerns the relation of human beings to society, God,

21 1989, 171. The Great Chain of Being metaphor incorporates what Lakoff and Turner call a “commonsense theory” of the Nature of Things, along with The Great Chain, the Generic is Specific metaphor and the Maxim of Quantity, which states: “Be as informative as is required and not more so.” These four, taken together, are referred to as the Great Chain Metaphor, an “ensemble,” which becomes a metaphor by virtue of the Generic is Specific metaphor (1989, 171–72).
and the universe.\textsuperscript{23}

Lakoff and Turner view the extended chain as “central to the Western tradition” but in other cultures, basic Great Chain metaphors concern the hierarchy for example of forms of life—dogs higher than insects, etc.—and incorporate ideas of complexity. According to the basic Great Chain metaphor, “where a being falls in the scale of beings depends strictly on its highest property.”\textsuperscript{24} For example, humans share instincts with animals, but not their “mental, moral and aesthetic” parameters. Thus “levels” on the chain are defined by attributes and behaviors.

The basic Great Chain links Humans, Animals, Plants, Complex Objects, and Natural Physical Things. Each has “all of the attribute types lower on the hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{25} It is “more than just a metaphor: it is a recurring conceptual complex made up of a metaphor, a commonsense theory, and a communicative principle.” In its basic form, the Great Chain of Being allows us to map components of natural processes onto human emotions—for example, “Big thunder/little rain” can be understood to refer to people (all talk and no action).\textsuperscript{26} The metaphor also helps us understand the nonhuman in terms of the human.

The Western, extended version of the Great Chain also includes notions of connection between macrocosm and microcosm. As Lakoff and Turner describe it, “At each level, there were higher and lower forms of being, with the higher forms dominating the lower.” Predators over herbivores, kings above peasants, men above women, God

\textsuperscript{23} 1989, 167.
\textsuperscript{24} 1989, 168.
\textsuperscript{25} 1989, 170–71.
\textsuperscript{26} 1989, 177.
above angels.\textsuperscript{27} Lakoff and Turner point out that non-Western religions may subvert or invert the chain, a historical transformation that we have also seen in esoteric interpretations of the metaphor. Lakoff and Turner are interested in explaining the cultural transformations of the Great Chain as a cognitive model that is acquired both experientially and culturally. My study here is intended to add to their work by evaluating how the principles of blending theory can explain its transformation in specific directions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

\textit{Blending Theory}

Blending theory was developed from within conceptual metaphor theory in order to give greater insight into how and why metaphors change over time, not just cross-culturally, but within the same culture. The term \textit{evolution} has been blended in all sorts of ways since 1859. Scientists have often found it useful to personify Evolution in an attempt to help people better grasp a theory that is conceptually difficult, since it extends over extremely long periods of time and affects groups rather than individuals. The pronghorn chased by ghosts is just one of these types of blends.

Models of the afterlife are an interesting area of analysis for blending theory. General “templates” for Heaven and Hell have existed culturally for a long time. But as we have seen, a static heaven gave way to an active, progressive heaven through Swedenborg and the modern heaven movement. According to blending theory, this transformation occurred through a process that Fauconnier and Turner call “running the

\textsuperscript{27} 1989, 209. The Great Chain has also been extended to relate to social and political conditions. Lakoff and Turner discuss its past use to justify right is might, humans dominating animals, and the strong governing weak. It can reify the current state of affairs in a manner similar to social Darwinism. However, this is just one of its many applications.
blend,” which means selective combining of inputs from various mental spaces into a single unit and elaboration upon the connections between the various spaces. They describe a “flash” of comprehension that often occurs when “running” a blend, which they compare to the “magical ‘act of creation’” proposed by Arthur Koestler, a twentieth-century author who also became involved in the dialogue about evolutionary esotericisms. The “flash,” they maintain, is dependent upon the unconscious maintenance of “counterpart links…as they change dynamically across…[multiple] mental spaces.”

When working with an existing template, as Fauconnier and Turner describe it, “The creative part comes in running the blend for the specific case. In cultural practices, the culture may already have run a blend to a great level of specificity for specific inputs.” For thousands of years, the culturally specific blend of the Western heaven has included God, the Savior, angels and saints in white robes, and the souls of dead people. But during the nineteenth century, the figure of Jesus as Savior was deemphasized in favor of departed loved ones, and elements of the Christian heaven were combined selectively with elements from the classroom input space, building on Lessing, in tandem with elements of Swedenborg’s notion of self-perfection. Angels dressed in modern clothes began to take the place of saints and a Savior.

The term “input space” will be used in the coming discussion of blending. It is derived from Fauconnier’s theory of mental spaces, which are “relatively small mental models of particular situations that have been structured by the concepts in our conceptual systems.”

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29 2002, 72.
30 Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 261.
school, etc., as each making up a “mental space” that is “framed,” or organized, in a specific cultural way. Spaces are constructed from cultural building blocks and conceptual domains. Blending theory usually starts with a “generic space,” though that step is often omitted. Information is “mapped” from one or more input spaces into a new blended space that contains some elements of each input space. The mapping takes the form of an “integration network” that includes the optional generic space, one or more input spaces, and the blended space. Connections between the spaces can take place by analogy or the application of what are called “vital relations,” of which more below.

New blended spaces based on an existing blend must take cultural templates into account but they do not have to exactly replicate existing templates. In fact, the new blend often clashes with the template in important ways. This is where the cultural creativity comes in. A particular variation of the nineteenth-century modern heaven blended space considers earth as a schoolroom, and death as a kind of graduation into higher forms of education. In this blended space, only selective parts of the education space have been added or “compressed” into the heaven space. For example, the university cap and gown are typically omitted from arrival into the heavenly classroom. But the notion of instructors and pupils moving toward higher “degrees” is applied. When a blend is at “equilibrium,” or “happy,” it appears seamless and nobody really notices clashes or the lack of certain elements.

Types of Networks

When we begin to consider religious and philosophical concepts, it is easy to see that multiple input spaces may contribute to a single blended space, and that some blends are more complex than others. In blending, a “network” incorporates the totality of the
spaces being combined to create a new concept. Before we evaluate the specific networks engaged in forming the blends Salvation is Evolution and Evolution is Therapy, let us first review the types of networks defined by blending theory.

A “simplex” network is one in which “there is no clash between the inputs, such as competing frames or incompatible counterpart elements.” For example, the human family frame can be combined in a simple way with an input space of two people, who become father and daughter in the blend. Relevant parts of the frame are projected and integrated.31

A “mirror network is an integration network in which all spaces—inputs, generic, and blend—share an organizing frame,” for example, a football game or a boat sailing along in an ocean. 32 A mirror network can perform compressions, and clashes may take place at sub-levels—for example, if we imagine boats from two centuries or players from different generations meeting in the same location.

A single-scope network combines “two input spaces with different organizing frames, one of which is projected to organize the blend,” but not the other. For example, a boxing frame and an office frame may be combined into a blended frame describing business competition. The boxing match provides the total frame for the action. We do not imagine desks and chairs from the office in the boxing ring. The utility of such blends is that they may evoke emotions that provide insight into the activities engaged in by the business community, even though we do not see people actually knocking one another out with boxing gloves in the corporate world.33

31 Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 120.
33 Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 129.
The network type that is most applicable to our current study is that of the double-scope network, which combines “inputs with different (and often clashing) organizing frames as well as an organizing frame for the blend that includes parts of each of those frames and has emergent structure of its own.” In a double-scope network, both frames contribute to the blend. As an example, Fauconnier and Turner cite the computer “desktop,” which selectively draws elements from office work (file folder, trash can) and computer commands (save, delete).  

Although of only passing relevance to this study, Fauconnier and Turner argue that it is the capacity to perform double-scope blending that “is characteristic of human beings but not other species and is indispensable across art, religion, reasoning, science, and other singular mental feats that are characteristic of human beings.” It is also the “indispensable capacity needed for language.”

Double-scope blending, they argue, also plays a crucial role in category change. For example, complex numbers are a double-scope blend that “constitutes a new and richer way to understand numbers and space. Yet it also retains its connections to the earlier conceptions provided by the input spaces. Conceptual change of this sort is not just replacement. It is the creation of more elaborate and richly connected networks of spaces.” So when Wallace began first to argue that humans were endowed with “mind,” and to equate soul progress after death (salvation) with evolution, and Blavatsky took up the narrative with proof texts from Hermetic divinization narratives, they were creating a fertile network of “spaces” in which humans could begin to think about their destiny in a

34 2002, 131.
37 2002, 274.
post-Darwinian world.

Double-scope blending can combine more than two input frames. As Fauconnier and Turner describe it, blending can take place repeatedly, over multiple spaces. A megablend can be created if there is a shared structure in the individual blends.38 “Recursion” happens when one blended space becomes an input to another network, which ultimately allows for more plausible forms of compression.39 I will argue that recursion takes place when Salvation is Evolution becomes an input space for Evolution is Therapy.

Not all blends succeed, and in fact Fauconnier and Turner use a natural selection metaphor to describe the way successful blends are selected. “The brain can be thought of as a bubble chamber of mental spaces: New mental spaces are formed all the time out of old ones. We surmise that the brain is constantly constructing very many blends, and that only some of them are selected out for further development and application. Even fewer become available to consciousness.”

They expand the metaphor to an entire “culture,” which they describe as an “even larger bubble chamber for evolving candidate blends…only some blends will come up.” The ones that are “good enough” are not necessarily the best, but will survive for a time.40 Creative thinkers in every culture are the ones who construct and refine networks of thought. As Fauconnier and Turner remark, “Finding optimal networks has always been a highly valued skill, for which writers, poets, statesmen, teachers, scientists, and lawyers are highly regarded.”41 And, we might add, theologians, who are less often

40 2002, 321.
41 2002, 384.
recognized for their creativity, given that they usually claim that new interpretations are based in divinely inspired eternal truth.

Success in blending can be predicted, according to Fauconnier and Turner, by adherence to particular “constitutive and governing principles.” Of these principles, the first and foremost, or the “one overarching goal driving all of the principles” is “Achieve Human Scale.” All of the principles operate for this purpose. “Achievement of a human-scale blend often requires imaginative transformations of elements and structure in an integration network.” As we will see below, the unsuccessful elements of nineteenth-century blends were often those that did not achieve a human scale.

Additional governing principles are: to compress what is diffuse, obtain global insight, strengthen vital relations (identity, uniqueness, etc., as discussed in the next section), come up with a story, and go from many to one. The governing principles both cooperate and compete, and blending is often required to accommodate them. In considering the application of blending principles to appropriation of the term “evolution” to describe religious concepts, we should consider that the word developed dense polysemy at a time when values among different groups in Western culture were clashing. The ideas that succeeded, frequently, were those that told the best story and put the human at the center.

Vital Relations in Blending

A key to understanding blending and compression is a set of terms known as “vital relations” identified by Fauconnier and Turner, which are commonly engaged. A partial

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42 See Fauconnier and Turner (2002, 345–46) for a summary of constitutive and governing principles.
43 2002, 312.
44 2002, 312.
list of these relations is: Change, Identity, Time, Space, Cause-Effect, Part-Whole, Representation, Role, Analogy, Disanalogy, Similarity, Category, Intentionality, and Uniqueness.\textsuperscript{45} For example, the vital relation “Identity” may allow us to link children with the adults they will become.

As an example of blending with vital relations, Fauconnier and Turner describe an illustration that shows a dinosaur evolving into a bird through five different stages. The mind tends to imagine that a single dinosaur itself is transformed into a bird, which can then catch a dragonfly. The illustration strings and compresses vital relations including Time, Space, Cause-Effect, Change, Part-Whole, and Intentionality simultaneously. The vital relation here is Cause-Effect. Even though we know that many individuals participated in the process of evolution over millions of years, the image compression allows us to more efficiently think about the process. Interestingly enough, Fauconnier and Turner argue that popular understanding of evolution has lagged because the vast time frame of billions of years does not fit well into a human scale.

Blends can bring different times and spaces and individuals together and they can suggest causes. Intentionality is a vital relation often seen in religious thought. Compression of spaces may allow correspondences to be built “between one space and another based on similar topologies. Thus, for instance, we might map a linear scale in one space onto a linear scale in another space, or a source-path-goal image-schema in one space onto a source-path-goal image-schema in another space.”\textsuperscript{46} This is what happened when ideas from the biological chain of being became superimposed upon religious ideas about the transformation of humans into divine beings.

\textsuperscript{45} 2002, 101.
\textsuperscript{46} Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 105.
Another commonly used vital relation is Uniqueness, which we see applied both in the illustration of the dinosaur turning into a bird, and the pronghorn chased by an extinct cheetah. Fauconnier and Turner propose that reincarnation is another compression into uniqueness, in that it suggests that individuals living in different time periods are the same person, without any particular element to indicate connection between the individuals.\(^{47}\) Of course, believers in reincarnation would argue that there are spiritual connections. But in any case, vital relations that are of import in the application of salvation to evolution include Identity, Uniqueness, Time, Intentionality, and Cause-Effect.

**What Survived in Alteration: From Blavatsky and Myers to Roszak**

Roszak’s 1975 *Unfinished Animal* provides an updated twentieth-century synthesis of various evolutionary visions. His use of the term “evolution” generally considers it as open-ended self-improvement and species transformation. He presents his study as “a survey and critique of the current religious revival in Western society, particularly with respect to its ethical and political implications, together with an exploration of its meaning as a stage in our evolutionary growth.”\(^ {48}\) He evaluates 145 groups (including 5 influenced directly by Blavatsky) and identifies broad trends.

One immediately senses the difference an intervening century has made in the use of evolutionary language to describe esoteric religious themes. Roszak notes the prevalence of the metaphor of DNA, which he describes it a way that evokes Blavatsky

\(^{47}\) 2002, 118.

\(^{48}\) 1975, 3.
and Myers’s “germ” of potential. He asks whether DNA is “perhaps a time capsule packed with coded potentialities waiting to be triggered and released into history by need or circumstance?” He surely cannot find a consensus among the broad range of thinkers he surveys, who include Teilhard de Chardin, René Guénon, Timothy Leary, Gopi Krishna, and Michael Murphy, and yet he does paint a typology with broad brush strokes. 

Table 18 presents my summary and paraphrase of the basic components of Roszak’s system specifically as it relates to evolution, as presented in his 1975 work *Unfinished Animal*. I want to be clear that Roszak himself does not organize these ten points into a system.

In fact, his conclusion contains a different list, broader than just evolution. He calls it a collection of “centers of consensus” in the systems he has studied. His centers include: 1) Potentiality, the chameleon-like quality of human nature and “the advanced therapeutic thought of the day.” 2) Upaya (experiential technique) for approaching religion, therapy, and ecstasy. 3) Transpersonal Subjectivity, a psychologization of religion. 4) Universality, or acceptance that no religion has a monopoly on truth. 5) Wholeness, approaching a “healthy psyche” through integrating myth, magic, and mystery with history, technology, and reason, which requires understanding of an “original transcendent impulse bequeathed to us by the Few.” 6) Organicism, developing a tradition of “physical culture” and “joy in the body” which, Roszak points out, has been strangely absent in the West since the end of the Greco-Roman era. The celebration of or “assimilating the esoteric anatomy...to our own scientific knowledge.”

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49 1975, 76.  
50 1975, 252–53.  
51 1975, 255.
7) Illumination of the Commonplace. A grounded and this-worldly approach to transcendence. 8) Satsang. New forms of community.\textsuperscript{52}

My list focuses on what Roszak says about evolution, rather than an overall typology of 1970s counterculture spirituality, and I have created my summary of his evolutionary typology as a comparative tool. There is some overlap between his consensus and my summary of his evolutionism. Nevertheless, I have certainly called out “his” evolutionary system in a way that he did not. The original quotations and references to what I have distilled as “his” ten-part system are found in the Introduction. Although admittedly “Roszak’s system” is an arbitrary endpoint for my analysis, it does provide a rough identification of the components of the most popular evolutionary esotericisms of the latter part of the twentieth century. Table 18 repeats Table 1 from the Introduction.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{A Summary of Roszak’s 1975 Typology of Evolution}
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
1. & Humans descended from animals but natural selection does not entirely explain the evolution of human spiritual and mental activity as both soul and culture. \\
\hline
2. & Humans can direct the evolution of their species through transforming culture. \\
\hline
3. & We were created in the image of a god we are called upon to imitate. \\
\hline
4. & We can take control of our own evolution through changing our minds. “The way forward is…the way inward.” \\
\hline
5. & Unusual powers of mind are talents that all will one day possess as humans “evolve.” \\
\hline
6. & The next stage of human evolution requires conscious transformation of the personality. \\
\hline
7. & Traditional wisdom (backwards) is the key to going forwards. We can get help from “advanced” formerly human beings. \\
\hline
8. & Healing promotes evolution, and religion is therapy. \\
\hline
9. & The erotic points the way to transcendence. \\
\hline
10. & Exclusive truth claims are impossible and experience is the barometer of truth. \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{52} See Roszak 1975, 240–62.
Eight of the ten elements I have identified in Roszak’s survey existed in a similar or more primitive form in the systems of Blavatsky or Myers, though of course they are not the only sources of these ideas. The scope of this study prevents identification of other contributing factors. Nevertheless, the marked similarity and stability between some components of Myers’s and the Theosophical system is a tribute to the “happiness” of their blends.

Roszak continues a language of perennialism that is heavily inflected by Theosophical language but his conception of evolution as therapy shows more similarity with the unheralded Myers version than the more distant Blavatskian version. Roszak performs his own evaluation of Blavatsky a century on, and credits her for having mounted a “salvage operation” to bring “the evidence of outcast traditions into the discussion of human potentialities.” He also calls her “among the modern world’s trailblazing psychologists of the visionary mind” and describes her “ungainly metaphysical speculation” as “at least…a groundbreaking psychomythology of the transcendent personality.”

Roszak also explores the ways in which Blavatsky’s system was updated and altered during the twentieth century to incorporate this-worldly, therapeutic, and ritualistic components—for example by Rudolf Steiner and George Gurdjieff. And he explores the psychologization of religion, Wilhelm Reich, the human potential movement, Michael Murphy’s sports mysticism, and the infusion of Zen, Taoism, and Tantra into the mix. These systems are much more immanent than those of either Myers or Blavatsky.

53 1975, 124.
The thematic elements I have identified in Roszak’s system incorporate two additional elements not seen in the nineteenth-century versions. First, the opposition to absolute truth claims and second, a praise for eroticism as a gateway to the transcendent. In addition, his system is more focused on physicality and deemphasizes—though it allows the possibility of—both an afterlife and reincarnation. My summary is at best a partial condensation of themes from Roszak’s book, but it does serve as an analytical tool for evaluating the difference and transformation in evolutionary esotericisms over a century’s time.

At this point I will evaluate what I call Roszak’s system for its similarities and differences with those of Myers, Blavatsky, and Sinnett. I select those systems for the sake of analysis, and not to ignore other influences that contributed to contemporary esoteric evolutionisms. Of the ten points, the first two, which promote a Lamarckian interpretation of natural selection, are common to Wallace, Blavatsky in Isis, Sinnett, and Myers. They can be seen as part of the network of esoteric responses to Darwin.

The third point, the imitation of God, draws on Hermetic themes and is most closely related to Blavatsky’s work, though of course divinization is a common theme. The focus on mental discipline and training in the fourth and sixth points echoes the Theosophical tradition of adeptship but also evokes the psychological approach initiated by Myers.

The fifth point, the development of rudimentary (vestigial) or lost (potential) talents, as we have seen, can probably be traced to Blavatsky and Sinnett, as systematized and expanded by Myers and later thinkers. Further research may reveal the additional influences on this narrative.
As for the seventh, the idea that evolution lies in past tradition (we must go backwards to go forwards), Blavatsky was the most prominent nineteenth-century promoter of a recovered ancient wisdom tradition as evolution, though Myers also elaborated on the notion that the evolutionary future might be in the past.

The eighth point connects healing with evolution and religion with therapy. According to my research, the historical origins of this narrative lie in the nineteenth century, where Blavatsky and Myers made important contributions. Blavatsky drew together common themes from Romantic nature religion and spiritualism. Myers performed ground-breaking theological work describing therapy as a religious duty, and introducing the “secondary self” as evolutive, therapeutic, and salvific.

The overt connection of the erotic with evolutionary transcendence in the ninth point is, as mentioned, a twentieth-century innovation. We have seen that Blavatsky as well as Hardinge Britten and other spiritualists exhibited great uncomfortability around the erotic. Myers did promote the pursuit of art, beauty, and joy in a sense influenced by Neoplatonism and Renaissance humanism. And he experienced the mystical through the erotic in a private way but did not include it in his system. However, Kripal argues that the erotic was a hidden but essential ingredient in Myers’s work.\textsuperscript{54} Some of Roszak’s systems retain the Theosophical and spiritualist notion that future humans will transcend sex. One can hear a faint echo of Blavatsky in Roszak’s transcription when he writes of sexuality in psychologized language as “only one stage of the growing process, one provisional use of our vital energy which must undergo maturation and perhaps, at last, be assimilated to higher growth needs.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} 2010, 86–91.
\textsuperscript{55} 1975, 240.
Finally, the ideas that exclusive truth claims are impossible and that experience is the central component of reality are transformations that occurred during the twentieth century. However, the focus on experience owes something to spiritualism and the nineteenth-century “scientific” approach to personal validation of religion by way of phenomena. It also reflects the experiential focus of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and William James.

Roszak’s language is much more this-worldly than that of either Blavatsky or Myers. He provides an open-ended conclusion that does not elaborate on either heaven or life after death:

Our much endangered interval in history demands more of us than mere survival…more than social revolution. It demands a regeneration of life at some finer, more vibrant level of being, a qualitative great leap forward of the species whose outcome we can only fantastically prefigure by outlandish assertions of the strange and awesome. The powers of the third eye…the secret of levitation…the advent of extraterrestrial wizards…all these are rudimentary images of collective self-transcendence.  

Thus evolutionary esotericisms of the twentieth century, while clearly bearing a stamp of Blavatsky, Myers, and spiritualism, are more progressive and this-worldly.

Before evaluating the blending project of Salvation is Evolution and Evolution is Therapy, I will review the elements of the systems of Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Myers to see which persisted prominently in twentieth-century systems, and how the governing

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56 1975, 6.
principles of blending theory can explain that persistence. A bold font is used to identify the persistent elements in Table 19 below. Of course, my selection of bolded material does not imply that all evolutionary esotericisms today contain these elements, only that they appear more commonly. Further research into contemporary typologies is needed to demonstrate this very preliminary work.

**Table 19: Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Myers Combined: A Persistence Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Blavatsky in Isis</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The origins of physical life are unknown, but spirit vivifies matter and <strong>life ascends from stones to plants to lower animals and higher animals, including humans.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Evolution is &quot;double,&quot;</strong> of soul and body, which simplifies and completes Darwinian theory. The human physical form is a &quot;product of evolution,&quot; arising from Darwin's &quot;four or five&quot; progenitors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Humans most likely evolved out of the &quot;spiritual part of the ether,&quot; as &quot;monads&quot; which become human as lower leads to higher.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Higher intelligences (not necessarily God as we understand him) but more advanced beings originally gave humans mind. Humans are intended to continue to develop their intellectual and spiritual nature after death.</strong></td>
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<td>5. Humans were created in imitation of the divine, with more spiritual, androgynous humans preceding sexed, in a process of enfleshment in which matter gradually conquers spirit and <strong>divine faculties</strong> were lost.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The first four races of man were each more material than the predecessor: hermaphroditic and unfleshed, sexed and fleshed, sons of God, and giants. Yet they were also superior to modern humans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Mind sets humans apart from animals, and <strong>mental powers are a part of</strong> human &quot;psychical and spiritual evolution.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Humans are tripartite--body, soul (irrational), and spirit. Soul decays after death, while spirit ascends to divine union.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Although spiritualist phenomena demonstrate that some can use the forces of nature, only adepts and god-like humans with control of the passions can exercise divine gifts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. <strong>Humans can</strong> become adepts and initiates and thus achieve salvation through developing natural magical powers such as healing, and use the forces of nature to transcend the mortal state.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Mahatma Letters and Sinnett</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Seven-part anthropology.</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Salvation in synthesizing higher aspects of individual with the &quot;life power.&quot;</strong></td>
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<td>3. All life engaged in an inevitable densification and etherealization</td>
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**Blavatsky in Secret Doctrine**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Seven-part anthropology and salvation through synthesizing higher parts of the soul (generally concurs with Sinnett)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Densification and etherealization of bodies proceeds through seven rounds, root races and planets (generally concurs with Sinnett)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Reincarnation is the mode of progressive soul “evolution,”</strong> and karma accounts for differences in souls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>“Gradual and imperceptible” transitions between races evokes the principle of continuity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Mode of reproduction changes from race to race, with sweat-born giving birth to egg-born hermaphrodites, who reproduce by will and not generation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Humans did not descend from apes. Third-race humans (less material than ourselves), men and women whose bodies resembled giant apes, mated with mammals and their offspring became the ancestors of modern primates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The process of <strong>biological evolution</strong> and elimination of unfit species is <strong>directed by divine beings</strong> who ensoul all of “conscious” Nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>During the fourth root race, black magic and sex worship led to the decline of psychic powers and physical degeneration of humans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td><strong>Present-day humans</strong> are in the fourth round and the fifth root race, the most physical, verbal and intelligent, who are <strong>destined to gradually spiritualize</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td><strong>Contemporary adepts and masters demonstrate the possibilities for human evolution.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td><strong>Heightened senses</strong> and will occur during the future sixth root race.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. Psychic phenomena should be pursued only by the initiated.

13. The need for sexual reproduction will gradually disappear in future races.

14. **Future** seventh root race humans will be **god-like**, with less speech and intellect than the fifth-race, and will come to resemble sons of God and “Dhyāni Chohans” but retain the **experience and wisdom of their material evolution**. They may also **become creators of worlds**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Humans evolved by a natural process from protoplasm through primates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Humans differ from animals in the possession of mind and a germ of evolutionary potential for “self-development.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The phenomena of mesmerism and hypnosis suggest rudimentary and latent human capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Psychic powers demonstrate the way to future human evolution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Human evolution takes place both through recovery of animal talents and unfolding latent potential from a primal germ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Psychic talents can be arranged on a spectrum from subliminal and rudimentary to supernormal. The subliminal and supernormal will meet when fully extended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A “subliminal self” is responsible for psychic phenomena and has a therapeutic and “evolutive” nature and may be superior to the conscious self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Psychic development is equated with both healing and salvation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Humans have a duty to pursue psychic development along with healing, the arts, and philosophy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Advanced humans are templates for all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Moral “cleanliness” is also important for salvation, but asceticism is not required, rather a pursuit of joy and ecstasy as “holiness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Transmigration is the most logical explanation for the nature of the human soul.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The subliminal self merges into a larger Self or “World Soul” after death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Soul and ego survive death and continue to “evolve” in knowledge and power in other worlds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Advanced souls continue to monitor and assist those on earth after death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. The goal of human evolution is not discernable but an “ever-changing horizon.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most obvious theme to emerge from these comparison charts is that the bolded elements that I have identified as having persisted in the main stream of Roszak’s “Aquarian” evolutionary frontier are those that follow the prime directive of blending
theory, “achieve a human scale.” The elements that are least persistent are the more complicated elements of *The Secret Doctrine*, including the seven-part anthropology, root race theory—the rounds, globes, and races—and the complex myths of past fall and degeneration.

Although faithful Theosophists have parsed and re-parsed root race theory and systematized it into a theology, post-Blavatskian Theosophical teachers and groups influenced by Theosophy elaborated the human aspects and ignored the rest.\(^{57}\) Both future and past humans in twentieth-century systems tend to look like better versions of human beings, and not amorphous beings without intellect or animals with speech (though human-animal mutants have certainly become pervasive in popular culture, and their role in evolutionary esotericisms needs further study). But in general, we like to think about our future selves as being improved but recognizably human. Likewise, the seven-part anthropology may have persisted in Theosophy and some directly related groups, but proved too complex for most systems.

The second governing principle apparent here is the need for a story. Blavatsky did in fact tell more than one (conflicting) story. These myths did have an influence outside her immediate circle, but they were so elaborate and fanciful, not to mention that they incorporated elements of sexual guilt that clashed with the anti-clerical aspects of twentieth-century thought, that they also did not perpetuate themselves into the wider culture. Roszak calls for them to be treated as a “mythical armature for supporting a godlike image of human nature,” and laments Blavatsky’s “unfortunate literalism.”\(^{58}\)

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\(^{57}\) See Trompf (2013) for the post-Blavatsky fate of her microhistory. See Barborka (1980) for one Theosophist’s attempt at systematization of root race theory.

\(^{58}\) 1975, 122.
is quite a put-down for a woman who hoped to provide an alternative to biblical literalism.

The consensus story that persists in Roszak’s evolutionary esotericisms is a more simple one. Humans are connected with earlier human and animal life by way of either reincarnation or race memory, and are intended to recover lost talents, either from the remote animal or human past, or develop them from a primal germ. They will be guided in this by extraordinary humans or extraterrestrials, and approach their transformation by way of a therapeutic, incremental, graduated personal approach to salvation, and with the expectation of a progressive but open future. The element of mind implanted by higher intelligences has certainly found its way into what Kripal calls extraterrestrial esotericisms, and esotericisms of contact. Mind has become DNA, and the evolutionary jump-start is performed by extraterrestrials or by evolutionarily advanced beings, in both science fiction and new theologies.

The themes that survived maintain a general harmony with principles of blending, including “compress what is diffuse,” “obtain global insight,” and “strengthen vital relations.” Even though the individual may not be sure how his or her own life fits into the grand evolutionary scheme, the general notion that “evolution” can be achieved gradually in small steps by way of therapeutic techniques strengthens the vital relations of Uniqueness and Identity. An individual can imagine persisting through various “stages” of evolution and on into a transformed future state. This simplified story also resonates with the Purposeful Life is a Journey complex metaphor, which does not require a fixed endpoint, but merely motion along a path on a journey.

The connection of humans with lost talents from an animal or more primitive past,
as originally framed by Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Myers, offers a global insight that makes sense of connections between human and animal. It also opened the door to all kinds of ritual and therapeutic “technologies” to be incorporated into a salvation scheme outside of organized religion. This is an idea that could only have taken root during the retreat of organized religion since it provides a rationale for practices that have been rejected by ecclesiastical authorities as magic and sorcery.

Another transformation from the nineteenth to the twentieth century is the abandonment of elitism. The elements that dropped out of the systems include the warning that development of lost talents is reserved for adepts and advanced souls. It seems, in the period evaluated by Roszak, that salvation for all had become the norm. The notion of recovering lost talents of the past in order to become more like divine beings in the future reinforces vital relations and the notion of a purposeful life.

But adepts have not completely disappeared from the systems. They have just become more accessible. The notion of advanced beings providing guidance, whether former humans or extraterrestrials, remains a part of many systems, though the figures themselves change form. In an era when many religious figures have become tainted by association with institutional religion, former humans seem more plausible guides. And yet traditional saints and divinities often do show up in personal transcendent experiences, as even a cursory read of the literature surrounding near-death experiences (NDEs) will attest. Blavatsky’s incorporation of the Hermetic divinized human into evolutionary salvation systems remains a key component because it reinforces and affirms the most basic aspects of great chain continuity. It bridges the gap inserted by Christian theology between humans and divine or angelic beings, and this probably
accounts for its persistence.

Finally, Roszak’s system strongly links evolution with therapy. Healing has of course been a part of many religious systems, and there is probably an evolutionary reason for the association. People go to religious practitioners to get relief from physical and mental ailments, and healing rituals abound across cultures. Yet evolutionary esotericisms incorporate the self as therapeutic practitioner in way not seen in traditional religious settings. Roszak points out that Western religion abandoned the classical systems of physical culture. He includes “upaya,” or techniques of ecstasy, in his consensus list. Indeed his “Aquarian frontier” is characterized by a wide range of methodologies and techniques for approaching transformation by way of mental training and physical discipline. And so the transformation of salvation into evolution and therapy was so effective that most inhabitants of Roszak’s Aquarian frontier did not stop to question it.

The seamless acceptance of a new concept demonstrates the success of blending, as well as what Lakoff and Turner describe as the “power of revelation” that is found in metaphor. The use of “evolution” to describe self-transformation has ensconced itself in particular forms of religious and self-help literature. Lakoff and Turner describe this type of revelatory power as the “power that metaphor has to reveal comprehensive hidden meanings to us, to allow us to find meanings beyond the surface, to interpret texts as wholes, and to make sense of patterns of events.”59 In the end, this power of metaphor can be used to help explain the persistence of Lamarckian-style nineteenth-century evolution, even though it runs counter to the scientific mainstream.

59 1989, 159.
Salvation as Evolution as Therapy

We have reviewed in this study a wide range of ideas that fed into the contemporary notion of evolution as a kind of destiny or duty that incorporates progressive and gradual self-improvement. Diagram 1 looks for basic conceptual mappings across the domains of Christian salvation (Salvation), nineteenth-century evolution by natural selection (Nineteenth-Century Evolution), and Therapy. At work are a number of vital relations, including compressions of Time and Identity.

The first obvious mapping is improved life, which appears in all three domains. (When discussing mapping, I will italicize the terms that are mapped.) In Christianity, at least in most denominations, life in the present is supposed to improve somewhat for the saved, but the real promise is in the afterlife. With nineteenth-century Evolution, the improved life offered is for the species but there is also room for individual self-improvement to gradually affect outcomes for the group. This gradual improvement is also found in Therapy and maps into the generalized Evolution blend.

An obvious compression of vital relations is between the individual (in Salvation and Therapy), and the group (in Nineteenth-Century Evolution). Group improvement over thousands of years is compressed into individual improvement. Thus, what happens to the group in Nineteenth-Century Evolution happens to the individual in Therapy. Group is compressed into individual in the Evolution blend. Time is also compressed. Even if soul improvement is seen as taking place over multiple lifetimes, the blend still compresses what happens to multiple individuals over vast time spans and applies it to the individual over either a single lifetime or multiple lives in a shorter time span.

After all, though Lamarckian evolution remains quite useful to the Salvation is
Evolution blend, mapping has been selective. Most esotericisms are less about passing acquired characteristics to one’s descendants than about achieving personal improvement and transcendence in present and future lives.
**Diagam 1: Evolution as Salvation as Therapy**

**Prophet: Evolution Esotericized**

Salvation offers an *improved life in the present* for the righteous individual and *guidance from the Savior who will in the future after death conduct the worthy into God's presence.*

Evolution offers an *improved life for the group gradually in the future.* Individuals who undertake self-improvement contribute to the progress of the group.

An improved life can result from individual adoption of various therapeutic techniques in the present for the individual who applies techniques of self-improvement and gradual progressive improvement of mind and body.

Input: Christian salvation

Input: 19th century evolution by natural selection

Input: Therapy

Blend in generalized network: Evolution

Evolution offers an *improved life in the present for the individual who undertakes self-improvement of mind and body and further progress after death and guidance from advanced beings in order to become more like divine or advanced beings.*
The mapping of self-improvement from Evolution to Therapy is assisted by the accessibility of notions of individual self-improvement in nineteenth-century evolution and techniques for improvement of mind and body in Therapy. Individual self-improvement maps therefore from both Nineteenth-Century Evolution and Therapy to Soul Evolution.

Another contribution that Evolution makes to the blend is the notion of gradual progress, which is not usually present in the Salvation domain but maps easily onto Therapy. A gradual and progressive improvement of mind and body in the therapeutic domain is continued after death in the Evolution blend.

A final mapping from input to blended space is the mapping of guidance from the Savior in Salvation to guidance from advanced beings in Evolution. In addition, the Evolution blend accepts a partial mapping of divine presence from Christian salvation, but the soul does not merely enter God’s presence but becomes more like divine or advanced beings. The Evolution blend also contains elements of Hermetic and other divinization narratives, which are not mapped in Diagram 1 but are explored in additional integration networks in Diagrams 2 and 3. However, Diagram 1 shows the utility of the domain of biological evolution to enrich the more open-ended conceptions of salvation that were developing during the nineteenth century. One can see how and why the mapping came to seem automatic and even preferable to “salvation” in societies with active secularization during the twentieth century.

*Progressive Evolution: Wallace, Darwin, Blavatsky*

A good part of my investigation has been dedicated to the question of whether Blavatsky contributed anything unique to the discussion of evolution or whether she simply
combined ideas from Wallace, spiritualism, and her esoteric forebears. When the mapping is complete, what stands out is Blavatsky’s fuller assimilation of the Hermetic divinization narratives, along with her contribution to the narrative of vestigial and potential talents (see Diagram 2). Her connection of past humans with the Darwinian narrative of rudimentary senses was avoided by Wallace but was probably picked up by Myers via Sinnett or other sources yet to be determined.

Clearly it was Wallace (taking his cue from Davis, Evans, and Harding Britten) who first used the term “evolution” to describe a “spiritual form” that had developed “coincidently with” and permeated the physical body. But he also portrayed the body as having been halted in its evolutionary transformation by the advent of mind, which allowed humans to shield themselves from the impact of the conditions of life. When it came to the afterlife, Wallace did not attempt theological acrobatics, but maintained a standard spiritualist line of generalized progress after death. He looked askance at both Blavatsky’s mythology and her complex mapping of past animal talents onto humans.

I have identified Blavatsky as the first to use the term “double evolution,” which she claimed referred to a simultaneous transformation of soul and body. But it’s time to briefly consider what she and Wallace meant when they associated evolution of soul with body. Their terms “double” and “coincidently with” do not necessarily deliver, for is this soul-body evolution they perceive really happening simultaneously? Both saw the body as having been “prepared” for the soul in advance, and the soul continuing to develop after leaving the body. Their theories are a bit murky when it comes to portraying how body evolved while connected with soul. Wallace did spend some time speculating on how the actions of the “soul” while in body might affect the long-term group future of the
human race. And Blavatsky did, of course, develop her theory that body would progressively etherealize in response to the soul’s activity. She tried harder than Wallace to make things fit, since she portrayed the body itself spiritualizing over time as the soul progressed.

Blavatsky also supplied the intriguing premise of the Hermetic vision, that the soul needs the “knowledge and experience” gained on earth in order to progress in heaven. Further investigation of Wallace’s writings might discover whether he ever elaborated on his early evolutionary system, but if not, then most contemporary evolutionary esotericisms cannot claim lineage in Wallace without also acknowledging Blavatsky. Neither Wallace nor Hardinge Britten had the theological sophistication to create a successful blend like “double evolution.” Nevertheless, Wallace’s ideas of progressive evolution on earth certainly sound more acceptable today from the perspective of more this-worldly systems oriented around the evolution of culture.

Diagram 2 shows how Blavatsky performed theological transformation by three mappings. First, she matched Wallace’s “mind” with Darwin’s “mental endowments” and the Hermetic mind, a philosophical concept known as nous. Of course, Blavatsky’s nous is not the same as the Hermetic nous. Nous had performed all kinds of theological roles in antiquity through Platonic, Neoplatonic and gnostic systems. She was simply putting her own stamp on the tradition. In the nineteenth century, debates were raging as to whether it was intuition or intellect that formed the “higher” faculty, contra Plato, and ideas about the “rational” soul had certainly changed over time. Nevertheless, there was enough categorical similarity between the three concepts of mind that a blend could be attempted. Though Blavatsky associated mind with nous and the embodied divine spirit, she also
saw salvation as abandonment of the intellect in favor of intuition. The clashes made the
blend a trifle “uneasy,” i.e., not “happy,” in Fauconnier and Turner’s parlance.
Diagram 2: Progressive Soul Evolution, Blavatsky

- **Mind matched to \textit{nous}**
  - Higher Intelligences matched to Demigods
  - Gradual progress of body matched to soul

- Evolution is “double,” of soul and body.
  - Hermetic demigods originally gave humans \textit{mind (nous)}.
  - Improvement towards perfection proceeds by gradual change of soul and body.
  - Hermetic demigods are templates for future human progress.

- Gods were once human and humans can become gods.
  - Soul requires life in a body in order to become divine.
  - Body molds soul.
  - Demigods gave mind as \textit{nous} to some or all humans.
  - Soul descends through spheres and progresses out of them.

- Variation tends to advantage in the struggle for existence, and propagation of successful varieties.
  - Both “corporeal and mental endowments” tend to progress gradually towards perfection. More recent forms are “higher” and improved over the ancient.
  - “No limit” to the amount of change and complexity.

  Darwin, 1859, 1871, 1872; Wallace 1858, etc.

- Input space: Hermetic texts, 1st to 3rd centuries CE

- “Mind” exempts humans from natural selection
  - Higher Intelligent beings” operating by law of developed human intellect.
  - Humans may approach a higher state of perfection.
  - Spiritual form evolved “coincidentally” with the physical body.
  - Improvement via “progressive evolution” continues in spirit life.

- Input:
  - Spiritualism, 1860s
  - Wallace, 1864, 1870

- Material form “prepared” as vehicle for spirit.
  - Human mind makes it superior to animals.
  - Form ends with “man.”
  - Spirit of Man returns to original Angelic form.

- Blend: Blavatsky, 1877 and 1888
A second Hermetic mapping performed by Blavatsky linked, as discussed in chapter 5, Wallace’s “higher intelligences” with the Hermetic demigods, whom Blavatsky also associated with figures from other religions, such as the Hindu Pitris. These two important mappings created a blend that survived for a time, and feeds into some of Kripal’s evolutionary esotericisms of contact, as well as extraterrestrial esotericisms. But Blavatsky’s particular blend had enough unresolved clashes that it continued to be modified by future generations and competed with more congenial visions, including evolution as therapeutic salvation.

A third mapping connected ideas about gradual improvement from Darwin and biological evolution into the new blend of progressive soul evolution. As already seen in Diagram 1, this mapping succeeded and came to appear inevitable in later evolutionary esotericisms.

*Therapeutic Evolution: Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Myers*

Contemporary evolutionary esotericisms tend to incorporate a wide range of modalities for improving the body, mind, and spirit. Some include rituals, contemplation, and incantation borrowed or updated from traditional religious systems. Others apply time-honored methods of trance induction, enhanced with techniques derived from psychology and alternative medicine.

Diagram 3 evaluates the components of the blend Evolution is Therapy as it began to emerge in the nineteenth century. Input spaces include spiritualism, Hermetic and gnostic connections between therapeutic ritual and soul development, and nineteenth-century natural selection, including the reemergence of lost animal talents. These components were blended in the work of both Blavatsky and Myers.
Diagram 3: Evolution Is Therapy

Myers

Magnetic influences open the perception of the secrets of nature (Davis). Future humans will have more developed internal senses and mesmeric talents.

Input: Spiritualism

The germ of present humans preexisted in earlier “races.” Past humans had advanced senses that atrophied and were lost. Future humans will have heightened senses and mesmeric talents. Humans can achieve salvation through developing natural magical powers such as healing. Psychic talents of contemporary “adepts” show how humans will evolve.

Input: Blavatsky, 1877, 1888, Sinnett, 1883.

Cultivation of latent talents and senses mapped to future perfection

Future evolution is both recovery of past talents and latent potential from a primal germ. The phenomena of mesmerism and hypnosis suggest latent human capacity. Psychic powers show the way to future human evolution as well as healing. A “subliminal self” has a therapeutic and evolutive nature. Humans have a duty to pursue psychic development along with healing, the arts and philosophy.

Input: Natural Selection in the 19th Century

Rudimentary and vestigial organs show that use influences natural selection and may be inherited. People may recover lost animal talents. Human mental powers require cultivation; culture advances the moral nature.

Input: Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism 1st to 3rd centuries CE

Soul requires life in a body. Body molds soul. Body important to soul development. Therapeutic rituals lead to salvation.

Blend: Myers 1885-1901
The blend maps the cultivation of talents and senses onto a template of future perfection. The blend requires compression of the vital relation of Time and a mapping of Identity from past human and animal forbears (who are seen as possessing heightened senses and psychic talents) to future humans.

Blavatsky first performed this mapping by linking past races with advanced senses to templates of future humans, and the psychic talents of contemporary adepts with a blueprint for future human development. Myers, of course, enriched the blend by connecting the phenomena of hypnosis with healing, and by postulating a “subliminal self” that was both therapeutic and evolutive. Finally, his connection of evolution with a duty to pursue psychic development, arts, and healing provided a template for the incorporation of therapeutic ritual into “evolutionary” religion, or religion as therapy.

The metaphor spaces surrounding evolution that we have evaluated in this dissertation could no doubt be mined further and more deeply for examples of conceptual blending. But this preliminary investigation has at least provided greater insight into the emergence of “evolution” as a form of secularized, therapeutic salvation.

It is worth briefly returning to the Great Chain of Being metaphor as it relates to our historical research. Metaphor theory has provided a why for one of the consistent insights of this study—that animals are used when needed to give insight into human behavior, and discarded when human uniqueness is the value (bringing to mind Balibar’s critique that humanism is only able to define itself by extraction from animality). As Lakoff and Turner observe, the Great Chain metaphor usefully allows comprehension of human character traits in terms of nonhuman attributes, and comparisons by analogy between perceived related entities.
Plato can use animals as examples of how humans have “improved,” and to suggest the human future by analogy. For Pseudo-Dionysius, animals demonstrate the interrelatedness of the sensual and intelligent worlds. For thinkers ranging from Leibniz to Darwin, continuity with animals has been a way of showing the unity of all life. For Blavatsky, they are a source of rudimentary talents and an example of appropriate mating behavior, and for Myers, a fertile resource for examples of prior states of existence. They can fruitfully and powerfully be used, as we have seen, by Myers, to suggest a “fundamentally unbroken” series.

The human link with the “inferior lives” of animals suggest an analogous tie with “superior lives.” I am sure readers can come up with many more examples of this type of thinking. Kripal traces the development of a new “Super Story” towards superhumanism. He evaluates Nietzsche’s positioning of the human between the ape and the superman, which accesses some of the evolutionary narratives reviewed here, going all the way back to Pope’s contrast of Newton with apes in his Essay on Man. The Great Chain metaphor continued to be of use during the twentieth century, though it was depicted as flatter or more network-like. But the analogical connection of humans with beings that are as “advanced” from us as we are from animals is both seductive and powerful, and will no doubt ensure continued use of the metaphor in visions of human destiny.

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60 See Kripal 2017, 272–75.
Conclusion: Twentieth-Century Transformations and Future Research Directions

When I began this study, I was not sure what I would find. I wanted a better understanding of how the term *evolution* had been appropriated to describe self-improvement and personal transformation. I also wanted insight into what made the term so powerful, in that people often used it without considering the implications. Further evidence of this type of usage mounts. Starbucks recently launched a juice brand called “Evolution.” The ad agency that produced the brand explains in a video that rather than showing fruits and vegetables, they decided to create a symbol that uses sunbursts printed in the colors of fruits and vegetables. Although the primary value being conveyed here is health, elements of possibility and future progress are the subtext. The brand describes its philosophy as, “it’s always best to follow nature’s lead.”

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1 Underconsideration.com, 2014.
The reliance on a sunburst as the focal point of the design taps into the hidden esoteric emanationist narrative and the sense of possibility and purpose it still manages to convey. This usage and other contemporary examples suggest that dictionaries should consider adding a new sense to their definitions of evolution—as personal improvement or self-transcendence. But this shift is not likely, due to concerns about preserving the integrity of science against religious thought.

After completing this admittedly long journey criss-crossing from biology to philosophy, religion, esotericism, and the paranormal, or supernormal, what I am left with is a sense of both persistence and change. Ideas continually change form based on context, and yet certain metaphors do return as invisible building blocks of ideas. In my journey, I have not found a clear path, and have made my own leaps over numerous gaps and missing links in the historical record. I can’t describe my metaphors as building in a neat stack, but rather as emerging from a network of influences. But where documentary evidence is lacking, that network is still suggestive of the action of conceptual metaphor theory. I hope that I have, as Dominic LaCapra puts it, found a way to carry my texts “into the present—with implications for the future—in a dialogical fashion.”

Below I will briefly sketch out the broad trajectory of transformation for evolutionary esotericisms proposed by Blavatsky and Myers were transformed during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and implications for future research. The texts themselves, as well as new texts written by those who have used Blavatsky and Myers afresh in each generation, are now far removed from their original contexts. My research, though exhaustive on a few important individuals, has just scratched the surface. In order

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2 1983, 63.
to follow these texts into the present, I would have to broaden my scope considerably. Interested readers are directed to Asprem’s study of the early twentieth-century discourse around psychical research and Theosophy. Kripal’s works also provide a rich exploration of these topics, particularly his 2016 *The Super Natural* and 2017 *Secret Body*. I intend to continue my project of mapping out the metaphorical transformation of evolution in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

*Lessons from the Afterlife of Blavatsky’s Theosophy*

The future of evolutionary esotericisms is hardly unitary. If anything, what the experience of the Theosophical Society tells us is that “evolutionary” systems that are based in personal experience are difficult to organize. The history of the organization is one of schism and conflict. Many of the schismatic groups were driven by a desire to incorporate religious ritual, therapeutic practice, and the pursuit of psychic talents. Religion has a hard time surviving without ritual, which Blavatsky herself learned firsthand when she had to set up an “esoteric section,” as mentioned in chapter 6.

Deveney notes that those who were intrigued by Blavatsky’s writings and enthusiastic about the initial focus of the society on the investigation of occult powers found themselves stymied by her later refusal to sanction pursuit of phenomena. As Deveney puts it, “In disappointing the expectations of practical occult training, the Society left its disillusioned members open to the blandishments of groups that did not feel constrained by the cautions of the Mahatmas, and the members flocked in droves to join the new ‘Western’ societies that promises [sic] practical occult help and
Blavatsky established the “esoteric section” of the London Theosophical Lodge at least in part to stave off the budding competition, even after all of her warnings about the dangers of occult powers. Within that section, she also established a secret elite group that practiced ascent rituals drawn from ancient gnostic sources and taught “practical occultism.” After her death, one of her immediate successors, C.W. Leadbeater, went on to become one of the founders of the Liberal Catholic Church, which incorporated Theosophical doctrine into traditional ritual and episcopal attire. He also served as a clairvoyant for Sinnett in his further exploration of the Mahatmas. Eventually, within Theosophical traditions, the language of salvation for the elite and adepts alone was dropped. Theosophically based organizations have at various times offered training for all in meditation, psychic development, and consciousness raising. Today, the Theosophical Society in England presents, in addition to its philosophy, a variety of resources on meditation and self-improvement. Nearby is the College of Psychic Studies, a post-spiritualist institution inspired by Stainton Moses, which hosts a wide array of courses in psychic development, including shamanism, crystals, and “energy work.”

The nineteenth-century narrative that connected psychic development with evolution and emerging or lost talents opened the floodgates to the twentieth-century “Aquarian frontier” identified by Roszak. The lesson of this narrative is that successful theologies, inside and outside organized religion, are those that take on a human scale and address real day-to-day problems, including healing of mind (soul) and body.

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3 Deveney 1997, 83.
Myers Succeeds by Becoming Generic

Myers is an often overlooked and forgotten figure in the history of psychology as well as in esoteric thought. As mentioned, Jeffrey Kripal has tracked his influence on Michael Murphy, co-founder of the Esalen retreat center in northern California, who took up the term “supernormal” to describe extraordinary feats of mind and body.\(^5\) And yet psychologists are as reluctant to accept his influence in their field as religious figures have been to adopt his conclusions about human potential. Did he fall through the cracks or did he succeed by an unheralded influence on thought about “spirituality” and the mind?

What has become apparent through my study of Myers is that his ideas of germs and latent talents, of supernormal capacity and of a “subliminal uprush”\(^6\) became so commonplace early in the twentieth century that people gradually forgot where they had come from. And if Myers had unconsciously incorporated aspects of Blavatsky and Sinnett’s thought into his work, others returned the favor. William James, in the Varieties of Religious Experience, does cite Myers as the source of ideas about the relationship between a subliminal consciousness and a higher and more knowledgeable self, which James speculated is the true source of seemingly divine intuitions and guidance.\(^7\) But in spite of the citation, Myers did not become a household word. Nevertheless, he was also invoked by authors without citation, either consciously or unconsciously. As an example, I will briefly review two widely influential authors, Evelyn Underhill and Richard

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\(^6\) Myers 1892a, 359. This passage is repeated in Myers 1915 1:118–19, §341. Myers also described genius as “an uprush of subliminal faculty” before the SPR, as quoted in 1901, 195.
\(^7\) See James 1982 (1902), 511–13.
Maurice Bucke, who appear to have relied on Myers for conceptual development, with scant or no credit.

In his 1902 mega-bestseller *Cosmic Consciousness*, Bucke put forth his own evolutionary system, which certainly differs from that of Myers but also incorporates key elements of the discourse on race and evolution engaged in by Myers and Blavatsky. Bucke’s system proposed the existence of three kinds of consciousness, simple (possessed by higher animals), Self Consciousness (man), and Cosmic Consciousness, a “new faculty” based in “psychical evolution” and an “intuitional mind,” which has been achieved to date only by a small number of people but will in the future become commonplace as evolution continues. In other words, advanced souls show the way for all. Sound familiar?

Bucke also adopted a narrative of great souls that is by now also quite familiar. He includes in a list of those who have achieved “Cosmic Consciousness” many of the same figures idolized by Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Myers—such as Jesus, Buddha, Plotinus, and Jakob Böhme. Bucke incorporated a chapter from a work by Edward Carpenter, a man also on his cosmic consciousness list, which cites an “F. Myers” on hypnotic phenomena. He also mentioned Myers himself, using the wrong initials—“T.W.H. Myers”—but in a context of mediumship and psychical research that makes it clear that he is speaking of Frederic W.H. himself. On the same page, Bucke takes up the question of “supra-normal occurrences” that surrounded the medium Stainton Moses,

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8 Bucke 1991 (1901), 2, 4, 16, 66. Bucke also engages in a narrative of future senses that appears indebted to Blavatsky or Myers but also probably Max Mueller (24–39). Likewise, he reprises Myers’s observation that the mind is more primitive in dream sleep (45). And he uses a metaphor of evolutionary progress as racetrack, suggesting both Myers and Sinnett (53).

9 Bucke includes on the list a few women, thus initiating what became a larger trend in the twentieth century, to explicitly include women in a narrative that had primarily revolved around men.

10 1991 (1901), 368.
who had of course been studied by Myers.

Bucke also reveals his indebtedness to Myers when he argues that the divine voice heard by Saint Paul and Böhme was a secondary, subliminal, or “other self,” and that the phenomena of “spiritualism and telepathy” represent a “new faculty or faculties” rather than disembodied spirits, and that within humans there exists “psychic germ” of several higher races.\(^\text{11}\) Bucke’s work travelled round the world and engaged Aldous Huxley and Sri Aurobindo, to name just a few.

Another instance of Myers’s language being adopted via subliminal current rather than quotation can be found in the work of Evelyn Underhill, whose influential text *Mysticism* was published in 1911. Although Underhill drew upon a wide variety of influences, her specific discussion of the subliminal mind appears indebted to Myers, though further research may uncover other influences. Underhill describes a “further faculty in man” that exists “‘below the threshold’ of consciousness, and which thus becomes one of the factors of his ‘subliminal life.’” It was common practice in her day (Myers did it) to use quotation marks for phrases that it was assumed everyone would be able to identify. Her quotation marks around “below the threshold” and “subliminal life” seem to evoke Myers as a commonplace. Likewise, she discusses the role of the subliminal in artistic and religious genius in language that clearly evokes Myers:

> In the poet, the musician, the great mathematician or inventor, mighty powers lying below the threshold, hardly controllable by their owner’s conscious will…. In all creative acts, the larger share of the work is done

\(^{11}\) 1960 (1902), 370, 372.
subconsciously: its emergence is in a sense automatic…. The great religion, invention, work of art, always owes its inception to some sudden *uprush* of intuitions or ideas for which the superficial self cannot account.¹²

Future research will likely confirm my suspicion that the use of “uprush” in this context is an unconscious homage to Myers. By becoming as generic as kleenex, Myers did achieve a kind of immortality.

*Epigenetics and a New Imaginal of Human Possibility*

Evolutionary esotericisms began in a period when Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics was believed to be plausible. Most of the evolutionary esotericisms we have discussed have to do with the perceived “progress” of an individual soul, rather than progress through enhancing one’s descendants. Lamarckianism is only of use to individually oriented systems by way of the metaphorical compression of Identity or through an expectation that individual effort will lead to social and cultural progress. Neo-Lamarckism persisted as a “philosophy of hope” that would “allow man to take charge of his own evolution” until “the early decades” of the twentieth century, according to Bowler. Although it had at one time been useful to social reformers, biological Lamarckism was eventually discarded as not required for progressive social improvement or “cultural evolution.”¹³

After genetics was popularized in Julian Huxley’s *Evolution: The Modern*
Synthesis in 1942, it seemed that the idea of the transmission of inherited or environmental characteristics was dead. Nevertheless, Huxley went on to develop a relationship with the Jesuit priest and controversial Catholic theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), and to promote a new form of humanism that kept both progress and individual striving in the picture.

Teilhard, who was forbidden to publish his radical ideas by Catholic hierarchy, had tried to reconcile Christian theology with evolutionary philosophy. He proposed that a collective transformation was underway, a perfection through “organic linkage,” in which the “psychic element” expands from individuals through groups and brings humankind to an “Omega” point where “consciousness” becomes “co-extensive with the universe.”

Julian Huxley could not buy into Teilhard’s theology, but he wrote an introduction to his posthumously published Phenomenon of Man. Huxley went on to propose his own “evolutionary humanism” in the 1957 Religion without Revelation, in which he described “human destiny…to be the agent of the evolutionary process on this planet, the instrument for realizing new possibilities for its future.” Huxley did not make any major discoveries in biology, but is seen today primarily as a popularizer of others’ ideas. Nevertheless, he argued that it was “perfectly proper to use terms like higher and lower to describe different types of organism, and progress for certain types of trend.” Finally, “man…is the highest form of life produced by the evolutionary process on this planet…and the only organism capable of further major advance or progress.”

14 1947, 17.
16 1957, 214.
17 1957, 216–17.
Bowler remarks that “the association of Huxley with Teilhard suggests that evolutionary humanism and evolutionary mysticism are not that far apart in their goals.”\(^\text{18}\) It also shows that evolutionary esotericisms are remarkably flexible in response to scientific development.

Today, ideas about inheritance of acquired characteristics once again find seeming scientific confirmation in an atmosphere in which new opposition to genetic determinism has emerged, and it once again seems possible to connect some type of progress with evolution. Through “evo-devo,” (evolutionary developmental biology) and proposals for an “extended synthesis,” ideas of “soft inheritance,” or the “transmission of variations acquired during development,” have once again gained purchase.\(^\text{19}\)

We can expect evolutionary esotericisms to continue to shadow these scientific developments, as new generations of thinkers look for ways to keep the human in the picture. And at least the popular ones will most likely maintain a scientifically and historically unjustified but perhaps psychologically necessary hope in humanity’s upward journey. Or, to quote Hardinge Britten, “still stretch upward, still strive onward.”\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{18}\) 1984, 310.
\(^{19}\) Jablonka and Lamb 2010, 163. See also Müller 2007.
\(^{20}\) 2011, 29.
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