

H. P. BLAVATSKY'S LATER RECEPTION OF HINDU PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's innovative use of Hindu Philosophy in "The Secret Doctrine" (1888). Read in connection with scholarship on Hindu philosophy at the time, it is shown how the use and assimilation of Hindu philosophy in "The Secret Doctrine" was done in accordance with a pre-established frame of the Esoteric philosophy. It is argued that "The Secret Doctrine", as a textual product, can be regarded as an innovative product (re)constructing esotericism in a number of new ways: (1) in the sense that Hindu philosophy became of central relevance to the themes discussed in the work and thereby to the development of the modern occultism and theosophy, which the work facilitated; (2) in the sense that the identity of Esoteric philosophy itself was framed in direct relation to Hindu philosophy; and (3) in the sense that concepts from Hindu philosophy such as *purusha* and *parabrahm* were explored, reinterpreted, and adopted to be a part of the worldview expressed in "The Secret Doctrine", which in turn became central to modern esotericism. The article also shows that while all the traditional six schools of Hindu philosophy are mentioned in one way or another in Blavatsky's works, Sāṃkhya and particularly Advaita Vedānta played the most significant roles in "The Secret Doctrine".

Keywords: H. P. Blavatsky, Theosophy, Hindu philosophy, orientalism, esotericism, "The Secret Doctrine", innovation

INTRODUCTION

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was arguably a significant innovator in esotericism during the nineteenth century (Hedesan and Rudbøg 2021, 1–31). One of her major innovations consisted of using Asian traditions and philosophies in her (re)construction of esotericism in a time when Asian traditions became more widely known. This article on H. P. Blavatsky's later reception of Hindu philosophy chronologically continues where Rudbøg and Sand's "H. P. Blavatsky's Early Reception of Hindu Philosophy" stopped (Rudbøg and Sand 2020, 107–132). Rudbøg and Sand's work covered the period from approximately 1875–1888 and did not discuss Blavatsky's "The Secret Doctrine" (1888) in detail (Rudbøg and Sand 2020, 108). Blavatsky's "The Secret Doctrine", is however Blavatsky's most comprehensive work and deserves a more detailed study, especially her use of Asian traditions and philosophies. Buddhism equally entered into the composition of "The Secret Doctrine" (Rudbøg 2020, 83–105), but the six schools of Hindu philosophy received special emphasis as Blavatsky conceived the universal secret doctrine, which she claimed to be outlining in "The Secret Doctrine", to be the synthesis of the six Hindu schools. Blavatsky, for example, wrote, "As a whole, neither the foregoing nor what follows [in "The Secret Doctrine"] can be found in full anywhere. It is not taught in any of the six Indian schools of philosophy, for it pertains to their synthesis – the seventh, which is the Occult doctrine" (Blavatsky 1888a, 269). And furthermore, "Hence Esoteric philosophy passes over the necessarianism of this purely metaphysical conception, and calls the first one, only, the Ever Existing. This is the view of every one of the six great schools of Indian philosophy – the six principles of that unit body of Wisdom of which the 'gnosis', the hidden knowledge, is the seventh" (Ibid., 278).

While these quotes could be read as a dismissal of the six schools, as the secret doctrine is not specifically found there, in fact, "The Secret Doctrine" is consciously construed in relation to Hindu philosophy as the synthesis of the six schools, as the seventh school. Also, the six schools are all construed as parts of a unified body of wisdom and thereby each has importance to the synthesis. Some work has been done on the use of Hindu traditions in Blavatsky's work, but not much directly related to the six schools (Snell 1895, 259–265; Goodrick-Clarke 2007, 3–28; Hall 2007, 5–38; Baier

2016, 309–354; Baier 2013, 150–161, Rudbøg and Sand, 2020 107–132). Nevertheless, given the influence of Blavatsky on the modern religious landscape, a study of her reception of Hindu philosophy is in order (Hammer and Rothstein 2013, 1), as it in the long run will facilitate a historical understanding of how Hindu philosophy innovatively became integrated with esotericism and from there other modern forms of spirituality.

“THE SECRET DOCTRINE” AND “THE SIX DARŚANAS”

A common conception today is that Hindu philosophy is constituted by six so-called “orthodox” (*āstika*) schools (*darśana*) (Winternitz 1967, 467; Flood 1996, 231). This six-fold classification and knowledge of the *darśanas* did exist to some degree prior to Blavatsky, but Max Müller’s major study “The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy” was not published until a few years after her death in 1899 (Winternitz 1967, 467; Flood 1996, 231, Müller, 1899).

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, knowledge of Asian religions and philosophies continued to grow by the day and “The Secret Doctrine” is the first large-scale occultist attempt to integrate Hindu philosophy with western esoteric traditions and other intellectual strands. Thus, it is important from the outset to keep in mind that “The Secret Doctrine” – subtitled “The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy” – sought to uphold the idea of consilience, a union of all fields of knowledge, science, philosophy and religion, ancient and modern, in a time in which these were being differentiated. It sought to include spirit and occult forces in cosmology in the face of the increasingly dominant movement towards scientific naturalism and agnosticism, and it sought to contribute to the study of religions by rescuing “from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all spring” (Blavatsky 1888a, viii). This unity, which Blavatsky terms “Wisdom-Religion” in “Isis Unveiled”, is often termed “Esoteric philosophy” in “The Secret Doctrine” (ibid., xx, 11n, 17, 277, 298; 1888b, 196, 487). The specific philosophical system of “Esoteric Philosophy” described in “The Secret Doctrine” related to the so-called “Book of Dzyan”, which this work to a large extent is a commentary on, is termed the trans-Himalayan doctrine (Blavatsky 1888a, viii) and largely frames the comparative and innovative nature of the work. In order to demonstrate the universality of Blavatsky’s “Esoteric philosophy”, she con-

stantly compares concepts and ideas from relevant traditions and forms of knowledge from around the world – but, “Esoteric Philosophy” and specifically the “trans-Himalayan doctrine” are considered the fundamental measuring stick by which these traditions, concepts and ideas are discussed. Hence, Blavatsky’s aim was not to understand the traditions, she studied, on their own historical or contextual terms, as these would only represent the incidental exoteric dress of the ideas, but to discover, frame, and demonstrate their place in what she perceived to be the esoteric universal knowledge (Partridge 2020, 15–36). This is in principle not that different from what a number of philosophers such as Hegel and Schopenhauer did when they fitted Indian philosophy into their own philosophical systems. Blavatsky, for example, wrote:

If, in the Vedānta and Nyāya, *nimitta* is the efficient cause, as contrasted with *upadāna*, the material cause, (and in the Sāṅkhya, *pradhāna* implies the functions of both); in the Esoteric philosophy, which reconciles all these systems, and the nearest exponent of which is the Vedānta as ex-pounded by the Advaita Vedantists, none but the *upadāna* can be speculated upon; that which is in the minds of the Vaiṣṇavas (the Vasiṣṭa-dvaita) as the ideal in contradistinction to the real – or Para-brahm and Isvara – can find no room in published speculations, since that ideal even is a misnomer, when applied to that of which no human reason, even that of an adept, can conceive. To know itself or oneself, necessitates consciousness and perception (both limited faculties in relation to any subject except Parabrahm), to be cognized. (Blavatsky 1888a, 55–56)

Here it is quite clear that the views on causality found in three systems of Hindu philosophy Nyāya, Sāṅkhya, and Vedānta are discussed and evaluated or negotiated according to Blavatsky’s “Esoteric Philosophy”. Blavatsky contends that the absolute or “Parabrahm” cannot be conceived by human reason and therefore not be an object of speculation. Only the material cause, *upadāna* or the root substance can be an object of speculation according to “Esoteric Philosophy”, which here is construed as being universal and able to reconcile any differences or conflicts. Advaita Vedānta is furthermore judged as the one closest to “Esoteric Philosophy” and thereby deemed the most profound.

Based on the above, it will be shown in the following how Blavatsky constantly discussed the Hindu philosophical schools in relation to her system of “Esoteric Philosophy” and framed several central concepts from them into her own system.

NYĀYA

In the quote above Blavatsky wrote, “If, in the Vedānta and Nyāya, *nimitta* is the efficient cause, as contrasted with *upādāna*, the material cause, (and in the Sāṅkhya, *pradhāna* implies the functions of both)” (Blavatsky 1888a, 55). This quote is a part of Blavatsky’s commentary on “Stanza II” from the “Book of Dzyan”. More specifically, it is part of a discussion about the cause of “creation” or manifestation of the universe in which Blavatsky brings the doctrines about causality in the Vedānta, Nyāya and Sāṅkhya into play and argues that in “Esoteric Philosophy” it is not regarded as possible to speculate upon the “ideal cause” of the universe, but only the *upādāna* or the material cause since the ideal cause is beyond human reason. This is later repeated in a footnote of “The Secret Doctrine” in a discussion about the so-called nights and days of Brahmâ:

In the *Vedānta* and *Nyāya* ‘*nimitta*’ (from which ‘*Naimittika*’) is rendered as the *efficient* cause, when antithesized with *upādāna* the physical or material cause. In the Sāṅkhya *pradhāna* is a cause inferior to Brahmâ, or rather Brahmâ being himself a cause is superior to Pradhāna. Hence ‘*incidental*’ is wrongly translated, and ought to be translated, as shown by some scholars, ‘*Ideal*’ cause, and even *real* cause would have been better. (Blavatsky 1888a, 370n)

Several things are in play here. First of all, we see how Hindu philosophy and specifically Nyāya is a part of Blavatsky’s debate about the cosmos and its origin thus innovating “Western” esotericism in terms of cosmology in a highly comparative way, but it is also worth noting that Blavatsky’s source for this is clearly Horace Hayman Wilson’s translation of the “Vishṇu Purāṇa”, one of the eighteen mahapurana texts of classical Hinduism, which includes significant cosmological ideas. Very close to Blavatsky’s formulation in the quote above, Wilson, for example, wrote in a footnote in his translation many years prior: “In the Vedānta and Nyāya, *nimitta* is the efficient cause, as contrasted with *upādāna*, the material cause. In the Sāṅkhya, *pradhāna* implies the functions of both” (Blavatsky 1888a, 66–67n). Regarding the second quote above in which “*Naimittika*” is mentioned in parenthesis, it is the same and “*Naimittika*” is also clearly derived from Wilson (The Vishṇu Purāṇa... 1864–1877d, 186n; The Vishṇu Purāṇa... 1864–1877a, 112–113). Even though Blavatsky does not refer to Wilson, she does not simply imitate him as she obviously makes use of the scholarly material at hand to discuss more broadly, and for her own purposes, Asian doctrines

on cosmogenesis. She even indirectly criticizes Wilson's translation of "Naimittika" as "incidental" in preference of "ideal" or "real", but again without directly mentioning that the translation in question is Wilson's translation (Ibid.).

However, there is no further mention of the Nyāya school in "The Secret Doctrine". Thus, in sum, it would be fair to say that perhaps Blavatsky only here mentions the Nyāya school because of Wilson's discussion from which she also derived her information.

VAIŚEṢIKA

Vaiśeṣika is not directly mentioned in "The Secret Doctrine", but three passages mention Kaṇāda who is the associated founder of the Vaiśeṣika school. He figures as a "positive other" or in the theological narrative as a significant source of wisdom from antiquity, as will be shown in the following. In criticizing modern science for constantly changing theories about nature Blavatsky, for example, writes:

They [the 'great men' of modern science] had to go back to the earliest 'Gods of Pythagoras and old Kanada' for the very backbone and marrow of their correlations and 'newest' discoveries, and this may well afford good hope to the Occultists, for their minor gods. For we believe in Le Couturier's prophecy about gravitation. We know the day is approaching when an *absolute reform* will be demanded in the present modes of Science by the scientists themselves – as was done by Sir W. Grove, F. R. S. Till that day there is nothing to be done. (Blavatsky 1888a, 495) [brackets mine]

It is, furthermore, demonstrated by the fact Kanada in India, and Leicippus, Democritus, and after them Epicurus – the earliest atomists in Europe – while propagating their doctrine of definite proportions, believed in Gods or supersensuous entities, at the same time (Blavatsky 1888a, 518, 579).

These quotes are included in Blavatsky's comparison between ancient knowledge and modern science and are critically used to show that the atom theory is nothing new, that it does not have to be materialistic, and that once scientists existed who did not confine nature to materialism. In other words, Kaṇāda is part of her discourse for ancient knowledge against modern materialism (Rudbøg 2012, 136–205). Kaṇāda is rightly associated with atomism or *anu* (*Sk.*), but her usages of *anu* in general in "The Secret Doctrine" primarily seems to be derived from Bhashyacharya's "Catechism of the

Visishtadwaita Philosophy” published in 1887, Wilson’s “Vishṇu Purāna” and Monier Williams’ “A Sanskrit-English Dictionary” (1872) and not from the “Vaiśeṣika Sūtras” first translated by A. E. Gough in 1873 (Bhashyacharya 1887, 91–93; Blavatsky, 1888a, 522).

SĀṂKHYA

Sāṁkhya is the school of Hindu philosophy that apart from Vedānta figures most prominently in “The Secret Doctrine”. The basis for this might be that this school was better known to the “Western” scholarship at the time and that Blavatsky perceived the legendary founder of Sāṁkhya, Kapila, to be a great initiate of the same “Esoteric philosophy”, which she also saw herself as a spokesperson of.

In the following from “The Secret Doctrine” it is, for example, clear how the legendary Indian philosopher “Kapila, the great sage and philosopher of the Kali Yuga, being an Initiate, ‘a Serpent of Wisdom’” (Blavatsky 1888b, 572), is integrated into the universal tree of great spiritual teachers. Blavatsky mentions that is the *Tree* from which, in subsequent ages, all the great *historically* known Sages and Hierophants, such as the Rishi Kapila, Hermes, Enoch, Orpheus, etc., etc., have branched off” (Blavatsky 1888a 207; 1888b 552). The tree of initiatory transmission now also includes a legendary Indian philosopher, such as Kapila whom she thereby integrated into the universal wisdom. This is an innovation to the “ancient wisdom narrative”, which has been central to “Western” esotericism (Rudbøg 2021, 201–228). The esoteric initiatory connection indicated in the above is something that preoccupies Blavatsky to a great extent in the case of Kapila. In fact, there were several Kapilas or initiates operating under that name in Sanskrit literature according to Blavatsky, but Blavatsky, for example, discusses the Kapila mentioned in the “Vishṇu Purāna” and the “Bhagavata Purāna” by interpreting the stories about them allegorically to discern the secret or esoteric message in contrast to the explanations of the orientlists. While she argues that there are many named Kapila throughout history, the Kapila who in the Puranas “slew King Sagra’s progeny – 60,000 men strong” in fact was the founder of Sāṁkhya, the initiate. The story of slaying 60,000 simply allegorically speaking represents the initiate’s or the pure self’s slaying of the personifications of the human passions (Blavatsky 1888b, 571; Vishṇu Purāna... 1864–1877a, xlii). This framing of the Sāṁkhyan Kapila in the image of “Esoteric philosophy” is furthermore connected with the stories of Kapila having meditated for a number of years at the foot of the Himalayas – the seat of Blavatsky’s “trans-Himalayan teachings”. “The Sāṁkhya philosophy may

have been *brought down* [from the esoteric seat in the Himalayas] and taught by the first, and written out by the last Kapila" (Blavatsky 1888b, 572; Vishṇu Purāṇa..., 1864–1877a, xl, xli, xlii; 1864–1877c, 299, 302n. (iv. 4); Select Specimens 1835, 301n).

In terms of cosmology, Sāṃkhya is now and again brought in as evidence that the ancients entertained notions of evolution (that it is not simply a new idea) and that evolution also was spiritual (Blavatsky 1888a, 284; 1888b, 259). Some of the main translated Sāṃkhya sources at the time were also referred to as universal evidence of the seven-fold structure and the fundamental building blocks of the universe (Blavatsky 1888a, 45, 256n, 335, 456; 1888b, 449; Sāṃkhya Kārikā 1837, 135, 138, 5(l):199n, (vi. 4); Vijnāna Bhikshu 1862, 13–14). However, the concepts *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are the concepts derived from the Sāṃkhya philosophy that Blavatsky assimilates most prominently in her extensive discussions of the relationship between spirit and matter.

Concisely put, Blavatsky's philosophy is monistic in the sense that behind the complexity of the cosmos with its many levels and beings there is one absolute principle (the absolute or parabrhaman), which is beyond the scope of human cognition. In the manifested universe we perceive the unity as a substance that has two aspects in the form of spirit and matter. These two aspects, which in ultimate reality are an illusion, because the oneness of the one absolute principle only enters into a dual form of evolutionary and involutory relationship in the limited consciousness of beings bound by time and space (Blavatsky 1888a, 273–274). The perception of the world through limited and dual consciousness is thus relatively real only to the one perceiving, but not absolutely real. The Sāṃkhya system, however, according to the most established tradition is a real dualist system. *Purusha* or spirit is real and independent of *Prakriti* or matter, including the mind, which is equally real (Larson and Bhattacharya 2006, 49, 74–78). Nevertheless, a less dualistic reading of the original Sāṃkhya philosophy is also suggested by David Reigle (Reigle 2018). The two fundamental principles never really touch even though they enter an illusory relationship. This traditional dualistic interpretation of Sāṃkhya philosophy therefore in terms of an absolute ontological level opposes Blavatsky's monistic philosophy, but she still seeks to integrate the two as can be seen in the following:

In the Sankhya philosophy, *Purusha* (spirit) is spoken of as something impotent unless he mounts on the shoulders of *Prakriti* (matter), which, left alone, is – senseless. But in the secret philosophy they are viewed as graduated. Though one and the same

thing in their origin, Spirit and Matter, when once they are on the plane of differentiation, begin each of them their evolutionary progress in contrary directions. [...] Both are inseparable, yet ever separated. In polarity, on the physical plane, two like poles will always repel each other, while the negative and the positive are mutually attracted, so do Spirit and Matter stand to each other – the two poles of the same homogeneous substance, the root-principle of the universe (Blavatsky 1888a, 247–248; 1888b, 42).

From the above, it is clear how the philosophical ideas from Sāṃkhya on spirit and matter are compared and sought to corroborate with the “Esoteric Philosophy”. “Both [spirit and matter] are inseparable, yet ever separated” (Blavatsky 1888a, 247–248; 1888b, 42). The same is seen in the following:

Spirit is living, and Life is Spirit, and Life and Spirit (*Prakṛiti Puruṣha*) produce all things, but they are essentially one and not two. ... The elements too, have each one its own Yliaster, because all the activity of matter in every form is only an effluvium of the same fount. [...] (‘This doctrine, preached 300 years ago,’ remarks the translator, ‘is identical with the one that has revolutionized modern thought, after having been put into new shape and elaborated by Darwin. It was still more elaborated by Kapila in the Sankhya philosophy’) (Blavatsky 1888a, 284).

In the first quote and in several instances in “The Secret Doctrine” Blavatsky states that Puruṣha mounts on the shoulders of Prakṛiti, or that the two engage in this way as head and body. This is clearly an expression sourced from Monier Williams’ “Hinduism” (1880) where he states:

But although Prakṛiti is the sole originator of creation, yet, according to the pure Sāṃkhya, it does not [...] create at all to any practical purpose unless it comes into union with Puruṣha [...] But each separate soul [...] is a looker on, uniting itself with unintelligent *Prakṛiti*, as a lame man mounted on a blind man’s shoulders [...] (Williams 1880, 197).

Furthermore, Blavatsky might have interpreted the Sāṃkhya as holding to a fundamental unity of Puruṣha and Prakṛiti based on Wilson’s “Vishṇu Purāṇa” when she without making a direct reference, yet with quotation marks in an extensive comparative discussion of the absolute, spirit and matter with Hegel, Fichte, Hartman,

Schelling wrote, “Spirit and Matter, or Purusha and Prakriti are but the two primeval aspects of the One and Secondless” (Blavatsky 1888a, 51). Compared with Wilson, the idea of unity is clearly similar: “This Prakṛiti is, essentially, the same, whether discrete or indiscrete; only that which is discrete is, finally, lost or absorbed by the indiscrete. Spirit {*Purṁ*}, also, which is one, pure, imperishable, eternal, all-pervading, is a portion of that supreme spirit which is all things. [...] Nature (Prakṛiti) [...] and spirit {*Purusha*} [...] both resolve into supreme spirit” (Vishṇu Purāṇa 1864–1877d, 199–200). Here a higher unity of Purusha and Prakriti is indicated, which equally becomes Blavatsky’s interpretation.

The second quote above again clearly demonstrates how not only “western” philosophy but esotericism is integrated with and compared with Asian ideas when Yliaster and the elements from Paracelsus are merged with the discussion of Purusha and Prakriti from Sāṃkhya. This section in Blavatsky’s work was itself derived directly from Franz Hartmann’s study from 1887 of Paracelsus (Hartmann 1887, 43).

YOGA

The word yoga figures quite prominently in “The Secret Doctrine”, but Patañjali (who traditionally is regarded as the composer of the Yoga-Sutras) and the Yoga-Sutras themselves are not mentioned, at all. It was of course not until the twentieth century that the Yoga-Sutras, especially due to Vivekananda’s book “Raja Yoga” (1896), became more well-known and thereafter gained the popularity the text holds today. The Yoga-Sutras had, however, been known to some in the “West” since Henry Thomas Colebrooke and the Theosophical Society actually brought out some of the first translations and publications available to “western” audiences (White 2014, 105–106). In “The Secret Doctrine”, however, yoga is primarily mentioned in relation to Buddhism.

K. T. Telang’s translation of the “Anugītā” and the “Bhagavad-gītā” and Wilson’s “Vishṇu Purāṇa” are among the primary source materials for Hindu yoga. The two words, which Blavatsky used the most in connection with Hindu yoga, are, however, “Raja yoga” and “Taraka yoga”. Blavatsky never connects Raja Yoga with Patañjali’s Yoga, as Vivekananda, for example, did, and generally disregards hatha-yoga, “Hâtha so called was and still is discounted by the Arhats. It is injurious to the health and alone can never develop into Raj Yoga” (Blavatsky 1888a, 95; White 2014, 106–114).

T. Subba Row, the prominent Brahmin theosophist, is Blavatsky's primary source for the "Taraka Raja Yoga" and also for information on the Siddhis or yogic powers (Blavatsky 1888a, 292–293). Row correlates this with Vedanta (Row 2001b, 580–581) and rhetorically claims that the Taraka is actually the most important branch of the "wisdom-religion" itself and that it equally comes from Shambhala (Row 2001b, 581; Row 2001a, 453–454). Tāraka Raja Yoga is not a widely known form of yoga and exactly what it entails does not seem to have been explored further in theosophical literature or in scholarly studies on Blavatsky. In "Five Years of Theosophy" we are told that "*Tāraka Yog*, [is] one of the Brahmanical systems for the development of psychic powers and attainment of spiritual knowledge" (Five Years of Theosophy 1885, 568; Blavatsky 1892, 321). Tāraka means "deliverer" and this yoga form is medieval, also called the secret doctrine and is apparently based on some sort of light phenomena (Feurstein 2002, 435–436; Larson and Bhattacharya 2008, 361, 364, 58–92). The name Taraka does, however, also figure as the name of a Daitya of immense yogic powers (The Vishṇu Purāṇa... 1864–1877b, 69–70; Dowson 1879, 318), both of which Blavatsky seems to have used (Blavatsky 1888b, 382).

Anyhow, based on a long discussion of the classification of principles in man throughout the 1880s with Row (Rudbøg 2012, 377–392), who emphasized its importance, Blavatsky included a diagram of "The Sedentary Division in Different Indian Systems" in "The Secret Doctrine" (Blavatsky 1888a, 157), which includes three schemes including the "Classification in Taraka Raja Yoga." This scheme is discussed in comparison with Blavatsky's "'time-honoured' classification of the trans-Himalyan 'Arhat Esoteric School'" (ibid., 157, 593).

PŪRVA-MĪMĀNSĀ

Blavatsky does not at all mention Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā or Jaimini's "Mīmāṃsā Sūtras" in "The Secret Doctrine" even though she knew of the system when she wrote in "The Theosophical Glossary" "Jaimini (Sk.). A great sage, a disciple of Vyāsa, the transmitter and teacher of the Sama Veda which as claimed he received from his Guru. He is also the famous founder and writer of the Pūrva Mimāṃsā philosophy" (Blavatsky 1892, 162). The philosophy of interpretation, rituals and dharma does not play any significance in theosophy and is also the school to date, which has received the least attention by scholars.

VEDĀNTA

Uttara Mīmāṃsā Vedānta, especially the Advaita Vedānta associated with Sankara is beyond doubt the school of Hindu philosophy which plays the main role in “The Secret Doctrine” in terms of concepts and references used and in the way Vedānta philosophy is integrated into the philosophical esotericism of “The Secret Doctrine”. “[T]he nearest exponent of [...] [the Esoteric Philosophy] is the Vedanta as expounded by the Advaita Vedantists” (Blavatsky 1888a, 55) and Sankaracharya is “the greatest Initiate living in the historical ages” (Blavatsky 1888a, 271) and “the greatest of the Esoteric masters of India” (Blavatsky 1888a, 86). The other two sub-schools of the Uttara Mīmāṃsā Vedānta are not significantly mentioned in “The Secret Doctrine”. Madhva is mentioned elsewhere as a fanatic (Blavatsky 1987, 334–349, 343), and about *Vishishtadvaita* Blavatsky writes in “The Secret Doctrine” that it is “an orthodox and exoteric system, yet fully enunciated and taught in the XIth century (its founder, Ramanujācharya, being born in A.D. 1017)” and that the school is “the most tenaciously anthropomorphic in all India” (Blavatsky 1888a, 132, 522; Bhashyacharya 1887). Both the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-gīta*, which the Vedānta builds on, are hailed as cornerstones of the secret or Esoteric philosophy and Sankara’s “Vivekachudamani” or “Crest Jewel of Wisdom” is enthusiastically utilized. (“The Secret Doctrine” abounds with references to the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gīta* the main sources being: “The Upanishads”, Part I and Part II, translated by F. Max Müller; “The Bhagavadgītā, with the Sanatsujātiya and the Anugītā”, translated by Kāshināth Trimbak Telang; and Sankaracharya, “The Crest Jewel of Wisdom”, translated by Mohini M. Chatterji. For a more extensive exposition see Spierenburg (1992); and for the *Upanishads* as secret knowledge see Blavatsky (1888a, 269–70)).

Several central concepts related to Vedanta are also discussed and employed, but the limit of this paper does not allow a full discussion – only aspects of one case “Parabrahm”, which serves well as an example of innovation and the comparisons made in the Theosophical frame of finding universal principles of the “Esoteric philosophy” across cultures and other philosophical systems.

The absolute unity of everything in the form of an absolute principle is one of the central philosophical concerns of Blavatsky’s “The Secret Doctrine” and she clearly utilizes concepts and perspectives from *Advaita* in a comparative manner to demonstrate her subtle points. *Parabrahm* is simply, as a “‘Secondless Reality’, the all-inclusive Kosmos” (Blavatsky 1888a, 6).

Parabrahm is, in short, the collective aggregate of Kosmos in its infinity and eternity, the 'that' and 'this' to which distributive aggregates cannot be applied. 'In the beginning this was the Self, one only' (*Aitareya Upanishad*); the great Sankaracharya explains that 'this' referred to the Universe (Jagat) (Blavatsky 1888a, 7; *A Manual of Hindu Pantheism* 1881, 7–8; *The Aphorisms of Sāṅḍilya* 1878, 39, 42).

This is the "Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable Principle" of the first proposition of "The Secret Doctrine" (Blavatsky 1888a, 14–15), and as Blavatsky states, "The Occultists are, therefore, at one with the Advaita Vedantin philosophers as to the above tenet" (Blavatsky 1888a, 8).

It may also, according to Blavatsky, comparatively "be taken as a representative of the hidden and nameless deities of other nations, this absolute Principle will be found to be the prototype from which all the others were copied" (Blavatsky 1888a, 6).

Blavatsky also compared it with the Cartesian philosophers. She argues that Spinoza's philosophy posed an absolute universal invisible substance similar to *Parabrahm*, but that Leibniz contrarily perceived the universe as constituted by a plurality of substances. In connection with this she however found that "if these two teachings were blended together [...] there would remain as sum total a true spirit of esoteric philosophy in them; the impersonal, attributeless, absolute divine essence which is *no* 'Being', but the root of all being" (Blavatsky 1888a, 629).

The German idealists such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel and also Hartman are equally brought into the discussion. Here Blavatsky compares and argues, as well, that while their views are similar to the notion of Parabrahm "the Aryan philosophers never endowed the principle, which with them is infinite, with the finite 'attribute' of 'thinking'" (Blavatsky 1888a, 50).

This [discussion] leads the reader to the 'Supreme Spirit' of Hegel and the German Transcendentalists as a contrast that it may be useful to point out. The schools of Schelling and Fichte have diverged widely from the primitive archaic conception of an absolute principle, and have mirrored only an aspect of the basic idea of the Vedanta. Even the 'Absoluter Geist' shadowed forth by von Hartman in his pessimistic philosophy of the Unconscious, while it is, perhaps, the closest approximation made by European speculation to the Hindu Advaitic Doctrines, similarly falls far short of the reality (Blavatsky 1888a, 50).

It is clear that Blavatsky finds similarities between a number of traditions here, but favors Vedanta. The philosophical problem for Blavatsky is, as mentioned, that Hegel and the so-called “European pantheists” connect the absolute principle with consciousness, but according to Blavatsky the absolute must in principle be beyond consciousness at all time. Therefore, “A Vedantin would never admit this Hegelian idea; and the Occultist would say that it applies perfectly to the awakened mahat, the Universal Mind” (Blavatsky 1888a, 50–51). Blavatsky was also aware that similar subtleties about the absolute and its attributes are what distinguish the three main schools of *Vedanta*.

It is on the right comprehension of this tenet in the Brâhmanas and Purânas that hangs, we believe, the apple of discord between the three Vedantin Sects: the Advaita, Dvaita, and the Visishtadvaitas. The first arguing rightly that Parabrahman, having no relation, as the absolute *all*, to the manifested world [...] can neither *will* nor *create*; that, therefore, Brahmâ, Mahat, Iswara, [...] are simply an illusive aspect of Parabrahm in the conception of the conceivers; while the other sects identify the impersonal Cause with the Creator, or Iswara (Blavatsky 1888a, 451, 59n).

Thus Blavatsky clearly made philosophical comparisons in order to find the perceived universal principles of the “Esoteric Philosophy” as seen above, but she also adopted Asian standpoints as well, especially those of *Advaita* as seen in the framing of the quotes.

Before bringing this article to an end, it should, however, be specified that while *Advaita* is preferred to European philosophy and other forms of *Vedanta* on questions of the absolute principle, Blavatsky also in several places still contrasts *Advaita* with the “trans-Himalayan doctrine” of “The Secret Doctrine” indicating that this was the ultimate yardstick for comparisons (Blavatsky 1888a, 62, 136).

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the innovative use of Hindu philosophy in Blavatsky’s “The Secret Doctrine”, an important work in the modern history of esotericism, in which Sâṃkhya and particularly *Advaita Vedanta* came to play the most significant roles of all the six Hindu schools.

It was shown that the use and assimilation of Hindu philosophy was done in an innovative and comparative way in accordance with the pre-established frame of the “Esoteric Philosophy” or “trans-Himalayan teachings” of which “The Secret Doctrine” claims to be an exposition. “The Secret Doctrine” can, at least based on the above as a textual product, be regarded as a product of innovation: (1) in the sense that Hindu philosophy became relevant elements of discussion for the development of occultism and theosophy; (2) in the sense that the identity of “Esoteric Philosophy” was framed in relation to Hindu philosophy; and (3) finally in the sense that concepts from Hindu philosophy were explored, reinterpreted and adopted to be a part of the worldview expressed in “The Secret Doctrine”. Blavatsky’s “Esoteric Philosophy” and the reception of Hindu philosophy was, however, to a great extent mediated through the scholarship and the translations of the time (except for her knowledge derived from T. Subba Row) and fused with pre-established conceptions about “esoteric philosophy”, including the ancient wisdom narrative that had been core to “Western” esotericism. Elements of the Advaita, such as Parabrahm and an associated doctrinal perspective on maya or world illusion especially became a core part of the teachings in “The Secret Doctrine”. “The Secret Doctrine” was thus, as shown above, an innovative work of blending and negotiating numerous concepts from numerous traditions in the frame of Esoteric philosophy in order to establish “Esoteric Philosophy” or the secret doctrine as a universal yardstick. Given the recognized influence Blavatsky had on subsequent esoteric currents, it is fair to say that Hindu philosophy from here on became a recognized part of modern constructions of esotericism and the tradition that is portrayed by “the ancient wisdom narrative”, as it continued into the twentieth century.

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