

Chapter 5

The Significance of Experience in the Theosophical Worldview

5.1 The Importance of Experience in Justifying Theory

Having looked at how the religious, philosophical, and scientific fields of knowledge were typically treated by Blavatsky for legitimating purposes, and how each category suggested dual critical and constructivist readings, it now becomes necessary to inquire about another significant component of the theosophical mix. Confronting the dominant social avenues of knowledge both ways in the effort to legitimise a minority esoteric and spiritual worldview was one major facet of the theosophical impetus. Another equally important component in the effort to entrench an alternative cognitive worldview was to try and legitimise a much more expansive representation of the parameters of human experience. The theosophical system of ideas and beliefs proposes a multidimensional hierarchal structure, with each discrete level or plane said to require the activation of the requisite state of consciousness to properly perceive and cognise the reality native to that specific existential position. A purely theoretical enunciation of newly reconstructed and rehabilitated esoteric knowledge would remain an abstract hypothesis without the suggestion that experiential confirmation supported such assumptions, and could potentially be verified by the individual who had achieved the necessary expansion of consciousness. As well, authority figures of the movement themselves could justify their elite organisational status more effectively by claiming experiential familiarity with the states of consciousness that purportedly confirm the premises laid out in theosophical speculation.

To understand the motivation required to secure personal commitment and dedication to the theosophical cause and ideational system, we must try and explore the experiential grounds of belief and inspiration that seemed to be foundational for Blavatsky's continued efforts. This requires examination of some facets of her personal life as they relate to the issue at hand. As the dominant personage and primary authoritative source of theosophical theories and beliefs, it is only logical to assume that a great deal of the inspiration for proposing, construing and defending this alternative cognitive system must be based on significant personal experience. It seems fair to

believe that a worldview grounded on occult and mystical premises would implicitly avow the worth and value of those types of experience; and that its leading theoretician and promoter would have a personal familiarity and background with such states of consciousness. And given the adamant insistence shown by Madame Blavatsky that esoteric beliefs were based on a primordial wisdom tradition that valued the highest mystical objectives, her own commitment would appear to be derived at least to some degree on the following interpretation of religious behaviour.

The *experience dimension* takes into account the fact that ... the properly religious person will at some time or other achieve a direct, subjective knowledge of ultimate reality; that he will achieve some sense of contact, however fleeting, with a supernatural agency.¹

While a major incentive may have been to effectively change or transform the dominant worldviews, to proffer an alternative to the religious, philosophical and scientific ideational status quo, this determination seems to have been at least to some degree shaped by personal experiences and beliefs. And the states of consciousness pertaining to those forms of experience and idealised as ultimately desirable and supremely worthy of attainment, also stand as significant elements in the shaping of theosophical theory and practice. The undeniable authenticity of psychic and mystic modes of consciousness was a constant given in the theosophical worldview, as was belief in the special cosmic hierarchal status of the Masters of Wisdom. However, to try and entrench these beliefs and gain the attention of the interested public, it was necessary to show that there were means to verify such claims through experience. If the system promoted a belief in the possibility of enhanced states of consciousness, then some sort of authoritative precedent would need to be in place to give it the stamp of legitimacy.

5.2 Blavatsky: Experience and Leadership Reinforcement

Promoting a belief in the possibility of enhanced states of consciousness without a theosophical leader with a reputation for personal experience of those higher forms would provide only a hypothetical model rather than assure confidence in a confirmed and efficacious system. Discussions, reasoned arguments, appeals to logic, and portrayal of

¹ R. Stark and C.Y. Glock, *Dimensions of Religious Commitment*, in *Sociology of Religion*, ed. Roland Robertson, Harmondsworth/Baltimore/Ringwood/Markham/Auckland: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 256-257.

possible hypothetical scenarios promoting the legitimacy of supersensory and mystical states of consciousness would not in themselves entirely suffice to sustain enduring belief and conviction. Those already committed or sympathetic to the theosophical worldview would require continued reassurance of the special experiential basis upon which the authority of the leader of the movement rested. In this context the following characterisation of a “charismatic leader” by Wilson is appropriate.

The image of the charismatic leader depends on a mythology of origins; on the incidence of portents and signs; exceptional experiences; on his or her having had the opportunity to assimilate past wisdom; on hearsay stories of stamina, energy, untutored insight, and untrained exceptional abilities.²

Madame Blavatsky fits quite comfortably within this defining framework. Much of the biographical and testimonial material surrounding her career and exploits show that she perceived her life as a mission, with special significance attached to various events and circumstances. She often claimed that her Master had saved her life on different occasions in order that she be accessible as the chosen vehicle to transmit the teachings of theosophy, thus revealing a belief in the “portents and signs” of her special destiny. As well, the intentional ambiguity and embellishment of “exceptional experiences” actually reflect on the way she publicly recounted the narrative of her life. When relating details of her private life she effectively obscured independent outside inquiry about her “veiled years,” and promoted a self-serving mythology of origins that was easier to integrate into the supporting framework of belief. By continually reiterating that she was especially chosen to initiate the new movement by the Masters, even self-deprecation and protestations of unworthiness became familiar refrains and part of her personal mythos. Stories of her “stamina and energy” were recounted, especially as it referred to the process of literary composition entailed in the creation of her major writings, as well as in other deeds and undertakings. It was acknowledged that though she did not have an extensive formal education, her “untutored insight” about a multitude of subjects was widely esteemed and praised, especially in conjunction with her conversational skills. The very contents of her teachings illustrated how she had “assimilated past wisdom.” And the “untrained exceptional abilities” referred to her acclaimed mediumistic and occult capacities. And, although her purported extraordinary experiential episodes

generated both awed devotion and dismissive cynicism, it would seem highly doubtful to deny that in her mind at least, she sincerely felt that she had been subject to at times especially profound and qualitatively significant states of insight and cognisance. The following words of Underhill, although referring more specifically to the traditional mystic profile, seem to apply at least to some degree to Madame Blavatsky.

Whatever the language, tradition or symbol through which such a dynamic experience of the supernatural comes to man, whatever its limitations or temperamental form, the effects are always vital effects. The ordinary sequence of natural life may continue, but it is seen, now and ever after, in supernatural regard. The soul suddenly perceives within that natural life further unguessed possibilities opening up before it.³

The “dynamic experience of the supernatural” refers to a confrontation or encounter with the numinous that often is characterised in the terminology of mysticism, but may refer to other forms of extraordinary consciousness or awareness. It seems clear that Blavatsky was familiar with at least a few such discrete supersensory or unusual states, including possibly, some form of mystical cognisance. From her own claims and those accredited to her followers, it seems that there were a number of unusual kinds of experience that could be considered as habitual or recurring. These, if non-fraudulent, would more commonly be interpreted as varieties of abnormal psychological activity. Some could be evaluated as involuntary manifestations, falling below the threshold of consciousness. While others perhaps are indicative of more volitional mental processes, and suggest lucid paranormal states. And yet others more clearly seem to reflect a deeper emotionally tinged form of religiosity. In spite of the accusations that all her claims to such experiences were based on fraud and invention, the intense motivation and determined effort put into legitimising the theosophical worldview would indicate uncompromising personal commitment. The expenditure of emotion, intellectual effort, dedication to a marginal cause, etc. would most likely derive from energies fuelled by deep belief in the authenticity of the unusual experiences.

Blavatsky may have held a reputation for disreputability, but “the ordinary sequence of natural life” for her was dominated by a sense of urgency and fervour, that would logically seem to refer back to roots in some sort of overwhelming private and

² Bryan R. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p. 234.

moving experience on her part. Or perhaps reflect the cumulative influence of a variety of abnormal experiences. With the establishment of the Theosophical Society and the promulgation of its message, Madame Blavatsky could see “further unguessed possibilities opening up” that would provide opportunity to promote the kind of reality consistent with the content of her experiences, and the principles of theosophical knowledge that justified such a worldview. That she found a direct connection between experience and the representation of a worldview that esteemed such extraordinary excursions of consciousness seems obvious. It would appear that a dialectical process was in place whereby her own paranormal or deep psychological experiences were given shape and form through her understanding of esoteric theory; and that the esoteric framework of knowledge that she construed was felt to be justified by further manifestations of such extraordinary experiences. And the probable basis of such a view resting on some form of personal experience also seems more likely than the hypothesis that it merely resulted entirely from calculated manipulative efforts. Though that speculation certainly appears to be justified when looking at specific dubious incidents and events in theosophical history. However, to presume that there was no profound or extraordinary personal experiential basis whatsoever that inspired and motivated Madame Blavatsky would appear to be a somewhat harsh conclusion.

The following sentiment would indicate the psychological process of commitment to a worldview is based on an overwhelming sense of certainty in its correlation to an underlying datum of experience.

... elementary experience ... is something that tends to indicate totally the original impetus with which the human being reaches out to reality, seeking to become one with it. He does this by fulfilling a project that dictates to reality itself the ideal image that stimulates him from within.⁴

Blavatsky’s “original impetus” would seem to be based on the types of unusual and normally inexplicable experiences that she was subject to, or imagined herself to be engaged in. Clairvoyance, ethereal apparitions, astral travel, psychokinesis, clairaudience, materialisations, and other extraordinary forms of experience were alleged as examples of the kinds of paranormal phenomena she was felt to be engaged in. And where qualitative

³ Evelyn Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, New York: E.P. Sutton & Co. Inc., 1931, p.42.

⁴ Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, Montreal/Kingston/London/Buffalo: McGill-Queens University

contents were more profound, powerful, and emotionally moving, it would seem that more spiritually definable energies appear to have been active at some level.

The veridical status of the contents of those experiences cannot be independently assessed, though it would appear that the emotional impact and sense of awe they seem to have engendered at some point in life at least sustained her sense of self-assurance. Even if only a small percentage of such experiences were genuinely awe-inspiring and numinous, it would provide justification for possible exaggeration and embellishment to reaffirm the significance of the initial feeling. She thus appears to have “reached out to reality” to conceptualise or visualise a worldview that properly accounted for such forms of experience while yet embodying the values and ideals most esteemed and venerated. For Madame Blavatsky, these were drawn from the ideational materials of the esoteric tradition that she was fluent with. The “project that dictates to reality itself” was the attempt to define and structure what was in process of becoming the unique theosophical organisation. The “ideal image” was the nascent theosophical vision of reality, based upon a personalised reconfiguration and enhancement of the esoteric worldview. She was certainly “stimulated from within” by the desire to confront the legitimators of the dogmatic and materialistic orientations that she vehemently opposed. And by firm belief that positively promoting the authenticity of expanded or conventionally inexplicable forms of experience would add plausibility and glamour to the appeal of theosophy.

5.3 Blavatsky: First Impressions and the Mystique of Power

A major stimulus to the very inception of the Theosophical Society was the public fascination with what was popularly called “phenomena.” Particularly the kinds of presumed extrasensory experiences that regularly manifested within the spiritualist milieu. Madame Blavatsky first attained notoriety and public attention in America as a commentator, observer, and participant in the spiritualist environment. In fact, the main thrust of her earliest public arguments was that psychic phenomena are legitimate experiential manifestations, but can be explained in different terms than most commonly used in the spiritualist vocabulary. Rather than simply concurring with the prevailing spiritualist tenet that psychic communications and phenomena were exclusively products

Press, 1997, p. 9.

of the activities of discarnate entities, a different interpretation was proffered. She introduced theories based on a much broader understanding of the dynamics of psychic activity, locating those phenomena in a conceptual framework that allowed for the operation of extensive powers and forces within a unified multilevel universe. As well, her colourful and vivid narration of details and anecdotes from her globetrotting adventures were intended to convey an image of personal familiarity and expertise with all manner of occult and esoteric traditions, practices, and insights. By alluding to apprenticeships and initiations in Egypt, Tibet, India, and elsewhere before her theosophical activities, she created an aura of intrigue and elite expert status. For instance the impression she made on Olcott during one of their first meetings gives a hint of the kind of image she would convey.

I found she had been a great traveller, and had seen many occult things... She spoke of the materialistic tendency of American Spiritualism, which was a sort of debauch of phenomena accompanied by comparative indifference to philosophy.⁵

And A.P. Sinnett, an important early theosophical figure, recounts his own impressions of Madame Blavatsky's extraordinary experiential involvement.

I am not pretending to give an explanation of how he produces this or that result, nor for a moment hinting that I know. I am recording merely the certain fact that various occult results have been accomplished in my presence, and explaining as much about them as I have been able to find out. But at all events it has long since become quite plain to me, that wherever Madame Blavatsky is, there the Brothers, wherever they may be, can and constantly do produce phenomena of the most overwhelming sort, with the production of which she herself has little or nothing to do. In reference, indeed, to any phenomenon occurring in her presence, it must be remembered that one can never have any exact knowledge as to how far her own powers may have been employed, or how far she may have been "helped," or whether she has not been quite uninfluential in the production of the result. Precise explanations of this kind are quite contrary to the rules of occultism...⁶

Sinnett's puzzlement as to the causal process and his speculative interpretation reflects the orthodox theosophical explanations meted out by Blavatsky. However, regardless of hypotheses, the important thing to note is how the mystique surrounding Blavatsky grew as her reputation amongst theosophical sympathisers gained stature with the belief that she was fluently active in such a manner. This kind of talk helped solidify her charismatic

⁵ Cited in Gomes, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

⁶ A.P. Sinnett, *The Occult World*, retrieved from The Canadian Theosophist, 1888,

public image, and with the subsequent publicity she received, set the tone for how she was perceived by others. Thus acknowledged as both an active participant in diverse forms of supersensory exploration, and as a theoretician, capable of detailed, thorough, eclectic interpretations, Madame Blavatsky acquired an authoritative reputation amongst those sympathetic to the type of worldview she proposed.

The incorporation of this alternative minority cognitive view was linked with the message that the extraordinary human potentialities of consciousness she endorsed were indeed a legitimate, desirable, and necessary potential function of the human organism. And though latent and undeveloped for most people, the opportunity for conscious development of psychic and mystical capacities along theosophical lines was believed to be the first step to eventual full spiritual enlightenment. And not just in theory in some past or unspecified future time, but in real life practice, even in the immediate present. Typical theosophical perspectives like these repeat the message that Blavatsky enunciated, and represent the belief that the full spectrum of human experience includes capacities for psychic and mystical growth.

The followers of this, the oldest and greatest of the sciences, the science of the soul, aver that extension of visual and auditory power and mastery of the forces, first of one's own nature, and then of nature herself, can be deliberately and consciously achieved. Anyone, they say, who will fulfil the necessary conditions, who will obey laws as certain in their operation as those to which the chemist subscribes in his laboratory, can pierce the veil of matter which normally hides from view the eternal, spiritual realities, as the veil of day conceals the ever-shining stars. By such means can be attained the direct knowledge of the forces and intelligences of nature and the faculty of cooperating with them in what is sometimes called the Great Work.⁷

Since all explorations into spiritual realms are limited by an individual's ability to function in subtler levels of consciousness, it is necessary that he gain credible report as to his facilities for doing so, and to recognize through personal experience the focal centres of consciousness where movement is being awakened, the centres around which locomotion is to be oriented to reach higher consciousness.⁸

We are only halfway up the ladder of evolution at present, and so our senses are only half-evolved. But it is possible for us to hurry up that ladder – possible, by

<<http://www.theosophical.ca/OccultWorld.htm#first>>. (Accessed September 26, 2002).

⁷ Geoffrey Hodgson, *Clairvoyant Investigations*, Wheaton/Madras/London: Quest Books, 1984, p.1.

⁸ James S. Perkins, *A Geometry of Space-Consciousness*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1973, pp. 74-75.

hard work, to make *our* senses *now* what all men's senses will be in the distant future. The man who has succeeded in doing this is often called a seer or a clairvoyant.⁹

By incorporating and consolidating into the theosophical program the idea that psychic powers and mystical realisation were attainable and demonstrable even to a limited extent, the movement would acquire another source of possible credibility for those willing to consider the arguments and accept the claims made. Belief that trustworthy exponents could vouch for and verify their own similar experiences would insure more interest in the theosophical assertions about the psychic and spiritual potentialities of human experience.

And even if not actually demonstrated indisputably, the suggestion and speculation that it undeniably was at least a viable and conceivable possibility still served an important function. Put more succinctly in the theosophical context, if it was surmised and assumed that Madame Blavatsky had spontaneously exhibited, or intentionally utilised, authentic supersensory powers, whether privately or publicly, it would augment the appeal of the purely theoretical formulations of the system of belief. Just the hint that psychic phenomena were, or could be, genuine natural occurrences, and that individuals such as Madame Blavatsky could exercise such faculties, provoked interest and curiosity, both positive and negative.

For those unwilling to deviate from an entrenched worldviews hostile to belief in those types of abnormal extraordinary experience, such claims would be dismissed outright, and hence never considered as possibly true. For those who were open to such potential, the presentation of purported credible experiential evidence would provide additional legitimating credence. And, although literary, historical, and anecdotal materials could be adduced as supplementary sources of confirmatory testimony to such beliefs in general, the only way the new movement was able to maintain its impetus was with the continued experiential corroboration supplied by, or accredited to, its founder and architect. As the primary theoretician, mythographer, publicist, critic of the status quo, her reputation for active involvement with paranormal phenomena added to the mystique surrounding theosophy, bringing public attention to the theosophical movement

⁹ C.W. Leadbeater, *The Hidden Side of Things*, Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1977, p. 7.

as a vanguard in challenging the traditional entrenched positions.

The theosophical worldview thus was not only aspiring after legitimation on the basis of its critique of mainstream forms of knowledge, its rehabilitation of esoteric doctrines, its spiritual ideals, etc. It also tried to couch its appeal on the grounds of offering a feasible set of practical guidelines for awakening the extraordinary states of consciousness believed to be latent in humankind. And with Madame Blavatsky originally (and later other elite leaders) claiming a first hand experiential familiarity with extraordinary states of consciousness, a crucial component of the systemic mix was put into place.

The establishment of authority was based on the belief the leaders did indeed bespeak of authentic experiences, and that their methods of engagement could likewise be transmitted and utilised by their followers in the due course of proper teaching and conduct. Belief that opportunity for such participation would be forthcoming implied trust and faith in the teachings of the leaders as well as confidence that their insights and advice was to some degree based on personal experience. And to sustain credence and support, the leaders felt obligated to confirm their own claims to special status. Thus, most of the major theosophical figures, including many who subsequently broke from the ranks of the main Theosophical Society, are on record about having had what they say were personal paranormal experiences of one sort or another, whether sporadically or regularly, spontaneous or induced.¹⁰

5.4 Blavatsky: Problematical Issues in Evaluating Biographical Facts

Throughout her lifetime, Madame Blavatsky was constantly asked to demonstrate her psychic capacities or give indisputable evidence of such activities. Long before the Theosophical Society was contemplated she had acquired a reputation for having the capacity to demonstrate and expertly comment on such abnormal faculties, which largely helped solidify the mystique that formed around her. This was not an insignificant factor in enhancing her status as primary authority figure; although her explanations of such

¹⁰ Blavatsky, Besant, Olcott, Judge, Leadbeater, and other leaders have all been on the record in mentioning specific or general instances of what they claimed, implied, or believed were lucid personal excursions into psychic dimensions and/or states of consciousness. Whether via techniques of inducement, unexpectedly, or under the dream state.

manifestations were highly controversial and the source of either distrust or reassurance, depending on the position taken by the inquirer. However, despite engendering intense suspicion and hostility in much of the tradition-bound social milieu, the entrenchment of an authoritative experiential component in theosophical belief was necessary to justify and augment the purely theoretical aspect of the system.

Any inquiry into the life of Madame Blavatsky is fraught with difficulty from the outset. And although we are only interested in particular limited areas, these problems yet are unavoidable. Fundamentally, the major difficulty lies in trying to extract and bracket out undisputed fact from embellished or intentionally distorted or revised recollections. As a charismatic and controversial figure, Madame Blavatsky provoked intense reaction, both positive and negative, and subsequent accounts have often betrayed excessive disdain or uncritical idolisation. However, apart from such secondary accounts, an even more problematical issue is that she herself was consistently revising, retelling, and reinterpreting the narrative of her life, often intentionally exaggerating, omitting, changing, or disguising facts and details for her own private reasons. For instance, one biographer, Marion Meade, had this to say.

When Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was forty-five, she looked back on four-and-a-half turbulent decades and observed “One cannot remake one’s past, one can only efface it according to one’s strength.” Actually she took pains to do both, and given her boundless energy, such efforts at revision were not entirely unsuccessful. For the last fifteen years of her life, she worked strenuously to re-create herself, erasing what she regretted having done, inserting new material, continually editing herself into the person she would have liked to have been.¹¹

This kind of a revisionist process may or may not have necessarily been exclusively cynical, malicious, or intentionally fraudulent. Circumstances obviously dictated actions and reactions. And biographers and analysts have been both harsh and lenient in evaluating the number of questionable instances in which premeditated and fraudulent activities may have occurred. Madame Blavatsky admits to some exaggerations and revisions for a variety of possible reasons while vehemently denying or reinterpreting other claims that appear to have contradicted her statements.¹² It is not

¹¹ Marion Meade, *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman Behind the Myth*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1980, p. 7.

¹² See for example a cynical accounting in Count W.S. Witte, *Count Witte on Madame Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives, 2001, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/witte.htm>>. (Accessed

our purpose to delve into each and every biographical detail, especially salacious issues which have no bearing on our topic. When the possibility of personal revision based on ulterior motives is factored into the equation, the need for cautionary judgment becomes paramount in attempting to evaluate the historic record.

What is important to try and ascertain from the personal side of Blavatsky's life are the types of abnormal experiences that she herself may have been subject to, as well as the experiential ideals that served as motivation for the attainment of personal objectives. The kinds of subjective experience that may have significantly contributed to the theosophical impetus, and served both inspirational and doctrinal purposes. Admittedly, all biographical data that can be used as evidence to attempt to draw conclusions are first-person statements and reflections, or observations and commentaries by others, both closely and remotely connected to her. And these may appear both at the immediate time of the phenomena in question, or any future point when retrospective recollection ensues. As well, personal biases both pro and con must be factored in, even if as unintentional filters shaping opinion. And the very articulation of abnormal subjective experience is in itself at best of times, problematical and elusive. Thus, examples used and conclusions drawn can only hope to indicate basic experiential characteristics rather than precisely define the exact causal processes of each and every phenomenon.

So, given these qualifications, we will first look at representative examples of the types of abnormal experiences Blavatsky was passively subject to or voluntarily initiated. This will provide a contextual background for understanding the grounds on which she felt justified in promoting and confirming a heightened and expansive view of human consciousness. Then we shall look at a representative written presentation of how she envisioned the powers of man, and how she attempted to legitimate that view. Where textual analysis of formally expressed doctrine or belief is concerned, we are dealing with intentionally formulated ideas and thoughts, in contrast to anecdotal or secondary comments.

With Madame Blavatsky, a certain amount of self-assurance in the validity of her views derived from belief in the significance of her private experiences. However, in her

November 18, 2002). For a sympathetic interpretation, see Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky, *Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2001, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/zhelhpbl.htm>>. (Accessed August 13, 2002).

written formal presentations, she rarely goes into extensive first person detail (other than in the guise of fiction writing, or in private correspondence) to justify her beliefs. More commonly, she draws from the available body of speculative resources to try and present convincing arguments and support for her views. The personal element is there as a motivational factor and a source of inner conviction. And was acknowledged in theosophical circles because of her own charismatic status and reputation. But to try and obtain wider public recognition for the credibility of her claims, she more commonly drew on the authority of outside sources for legitimation.

5.5 The Relevance of Altered States of Consciousness as a Premise

Even a casual look into the life of H. P. Blavatsky will reveal that she consistently was subject to certain forms of what has been called “altered states of consciousness.” This phrase has been in vogue since the nineteen sixties, but cultural connotations aside, serves as a useful generalisation for the kinds of experience under discussion. Before looking at examples drawn from her own life, an interpretative perspective may be in order. There have been many schemas proposed to define the entire range of experience, from the presumed unconscious levels to the hypothesised supersensory and transcendent states. Extensive exploration of this topic would carry us far from our objectives. However, this statement suggests more than just a minimal range of possible experiences.

Typical examples are such altered states of consciousness as sleep, dreams, hypnotic trance, ecstasies, transcendental meditation, or crisis situations. Yet altered states of consciousness are only a small segment of the existential shift... It includes abrupt changes in the subject’s volitional and behavioural attitudes, his motivations and orientation toward the world.¹³

The important reference is to an “existential shift.” Not only is a relatively clear articulation of possible levels of experience noted, but emphasis is also on the belief that an “abrupt change” in the complete “orientation to the world” may be effected. This would seem to justify the pursuit of an alternative experience-based worldview felt to more adequately encompass the true potentials of human consciousness. The types of experience mentioned are broad and have been sub-divided and reclassified by others

¹³ Jan Ehrenwald, *The ESP Experience: A Psychiatric Validation*, New York: Basic Books, 1978, p. 238.

who have approached the topic differently. For instance, Stanley Krippner differentiated twenty states of consciousness.

In general terms, an altered conscious state can be defined as a mental state which can be subjectively recognized by an individual (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a *difference* in psychological functioning from that individual's "normal," alert, waking state. Twenty states of consciousness have been tentatively identified (with considerable overlapping) as worthy of further study.¹⁴

These encompass a spectrum ranging from entirely unconscious processes to explicit and intentionally pursued mystical kinds of subjective satiation. The category "Expanded" conscious states, according to Krippner, encompasses a gradation of four different levels, the highest being the integral level, proper to mystical experience. A more thorough and useful model is found in the work of Ken Wilber, especially in *The Atman Project* and *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, where modern Western psychologies are supplemented with Eastern philosophical theories to provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting the variety of states of consciousness in evolutionary and structural terms.

We arrive at something that resembles an overall life cycle. Further, we find that—if all the higher states reported by the mystics are real—this life cycle moves from subconsciousness (instinctual, impulsive, id-ish) to self-consciousness (egoic, conceptual, syntactical), to superconsciousness (transcendent, transpersonal, trans-temporal)... Further, we can divide this cycle, for convenience, into two halves: the Outward Arc, or the movement from subconsciousness to self-consciousness, and the Inward Arc, or movement from self-consciousness to superconsciousness.¹⁵

Wilber's categorisations are useful, but mostly are intended to illustrate an integrated life cycle and the ideal of dynamic movement towards progressive spiritual maturation. Another compatible schematic analysis may be more succinct only in so far as it provides a more extensive descriptive analysis of the types of experiences more properly reflective of those pertaining to Madame Blavatsky.

Defining and determining what portion of her abnormal or extraordinary experiences belong to which category is of course only estimable hypothetically

¹⁴ Stanley Krippner, *Altered States of Consciousness*, in *The Highest State of Consciousness*, ed. John White, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project*, Wheaton/Madras/ London: Quest Books, 1980, p. 3.

according to the predefined criteria, but yet may provide a useful means of understanding the internal and subjective determinants underlying her efforts towards legitimating the theosophical worldview. Additionally, the incorporation of such subsequently legitimated modes of exceptional, extraordinary, unusual, spiritually grounded experiences as part of the theosophical ideational fabric may be more easily assessed when considered from a more comprehensive schema than simply as random or unrelated phenomena. However, we very strongly qualify our use of specific examples taken from anecdotal and biographical commentary.

In fact, there are very strong arguments suggesting that much, if not the vast majority of assumed paranormal experiences attributed to, reported about, or having been allegedly demonstrated by Madame Blavatsky are not strictly reliable or trustworthy. And when the subjective interpretative filter is applied (by participant as well as observer) to what is essentially private and subjective, the problematical nature of the enterprise is magnified even more. So, rather than simply avoid dealing with the issue because of the inherent difficulties, and dismissing all claims as either delusional or fraudulent, or naively accept claims of the literal accuracy of all reports, we must try to judiciously evaluate and categorise as best we can.¹⁶

5.6 Gowan's Taxonomy of the States of Consciousness

Any such explanatory framework is, of course, hypothetical and functions as a useful conceptual device rather than as an absolute measure. Therefore, we have applied what appears to be a workable and widespread interpretative model for evaluating and classifying the types of extraordinary experiences Blavatsky may have been subject to. Although there are many theoretical models to choose from, some of which very closely resemble or compliment each other, we have decided to use the classifications in the taxonomy of states of consciousness suggested by John Curtis Gowan (1912 – 1986), who approached issues of creativity and cognitive development from the perspective of

¹⁶ For a critical estimation, see Elliott Coues, *Blavatsky Unveiled*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2001, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/coues.htm>>. (Accessed May 24, 2002). For a supportive position, see Ellen H. Morgan, *A Defense of Madame Blavatsky's Views and Phenomenal Abilities*, The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/morgan1884.htm>>. (Accessed

an educational psychologist. His main works were *Development of the Creative Individual* (1972), *Development of the Psychedelic Individual* (1974), *Trance, Art, and Creativity* (1975), and *Operations of Increasing Order* (1980). Although somewhat constrained by occasional usage of conceptual terms and references directed to nineteenth seventies sensibilities, his thematic treatment of the stages of consciousness is yet of value. By applying some of the categories of his analytical model to representative experiential phenomena reported by, or of, Madame Blavatsky, it may be possible to provide a useful means of hypothesising about the psychological dynamics that were at play during such manifestations.

To gain reputable social legitimacy, the theosophical worldview as constructed by Madame Blavatsky required religious, philosophical, and scientific plausibility. Or, effectively, the transformation of traditional institutions of knowledge, but now re-envisioned with fresh esoteric spiritual content. As well, the credibility of her personal reputation depended upon public validation and acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the non-rational modes of consciousness she claimed to be superior to prosaic understanding. And the continued reaffirmation of belief in a superior informing and guiding spiritual presence on the theosophical movement depended upon the personal liaison between Blavatsky and her Masters, which was predicated upon belief in the genuineness of her supersensory experiences. Hence the importance of trying to understand the factors contributing to that experiential mix. Without Blavatsky publicly acclaimed as a genuine occult or mystic practitioner with extraordinary skills, powers, or special knowledge, her proclamations would not carry the same authoritative stamp of authenticity. Thus it is necessary to try and explore, even if hypothetically, the possible subjective factors that cumulatively may have contributed to her public image as a psychic, medium, seer, prophetess, shaman, mystic.

We begin with the taxonomy of consciousness enunciated by Gowan. Primarily expressed in two books, *Operations of Increasing Order*, and *Trance, Art and Creativity*, we find a useful and inclusive framework for the classification of a wide variety of human experiences. The basic objective of this taxonomy is to show the relationship between the conscious ego in man and the forms of non-rational experience related to

what has been called “the numinous” or the “collective unconscious.” Gowan states that the qualitative value of the experience will be determined by the developmental level of the individual,

The level of developmental maturity at the time of the junction determines whether the affect will be dreadful and awful (using such words in their original meanings), as in schizophrenia or possession trance, or benign and transcendental as in samadhi and mystic rapture.¹⁷

Basing his terminology on the work of Harry Stack Sullivan, he distinguishes three modes of the cognitive encounter with the numinous. These are:

prototaxic (experience occurring before symbols), *parataxic* (experience using symbols in a private or autistic way), and *syntaxic* (experience which can be communicated).¹⁸

Gowan first of all defines what he means by “numinous.” It is derived from the interpretation given by Rudolph Otto, in which it is expressed as the fundamental ground of being, the holy minus its moral and rational factors, and characterised by the elements of awe-fullness, overpoweringness, and energy. It is also “wholly other” than what is familiar and knowable by normal means of consciousness, and contains the element of fascination. And though it can be discussed, it cannot be strictly defined. Gowan notes that similar notions have been expressed in different cultural contexts, and sees the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious as a practicable theory accounting for the source of such manifestations. He uses the term “preconscious” to cover the same conceptual territory

Gowan in fact uses the criteria of ego control and increased creativity to differentiate between the various stages of maturity. He sees an ascending movement from “worse” to “better” in terms of movement away from the dissociation typical of the prototaxic through to subsequent increase of positive emotion and mental health at the parataxic stage. Further, the syntaxic stage reveals more integrated ego management and creative operations. And each discrete stage brings with it a distinctive treatment of numinous experience. At the prototaxic level, experience at its extreme is characterised by motor automatisms, with the ego absent and tending towards states of dissociation.

¹⁷ John Curtis Gowan, *Operations of Increasing Order*, Westlake Village, California: privately published, 1980, p. 324.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Some of the experiential phenomena native to this state are schizophrenia, trance, hypnotism, certain effects of proactive drugs, and automatic writing. As the ego emerges and stabilises, the parataxic state becomes dominant. This is the domain of images, generally represented through archetypal manifestations, dreams, rituals, myth, and art. And as the ego develops more fully and under more control, the syntactic stage is reached, with an increase of cognitive representation. This level of experience includes manifestations of increased creativity, ortho-cognition, states of consciousness related to meditation, and higher psychic and mystical capacities.

The features of the numinous experience for the subject are expressed as polar opposites when located at either extreme. The prototaxic extreme represents weak ego, loss of will, loss of memorability, the ego function excursed, somatic activity, superstition, non self-actualisation, motor automatisms, possession, madness, anxiety, horror, fear, dread, trance, general negative effects, crudity of effect, dissociation, lack of control of the preconscious. Conversely, at the syntactic extreme, the experience of the numinous leads to strong ego, evidence of will, memorability, the preservation or transcendence of ego function, cognitive activity, enlightenment, self-actualisation, cognitive representation, illumination, positive mental health, serendipity, love, compassion, charity, creativity, general positive effects, refinement of effect, integration, control of the preconscious. The differentiation is explained further.

This difference which exists as a taxonomic hierarchy or gradation of different levels of the parameter can be spelled out with the following characteristics:

- a) will: in the higher states there is evidence of will; the individual will has been carried out by the numinous element (as in a creative product); in the lower states there is no such evidence, the preconscious seems to spew out whatever material adventitiously comes ...
- b) memorability: in the higher states there is generally memory of the experience; in the lower states there most usually is not.
- c) ego function: in the lower states the ego seems to disappear (there is an *excursus*); in the higher states the ego is changed but does not seem to vanish in the same way.
- d) crudity—refinement: in the lower state the character of the experience appears crude (dissociative ramblings, psychic tricks such as poltergeist phenomena, half formed words, glossolalia); in the higher levels we get works of art or other creative products; high level ideas, etc.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 2.

The bulk of Gowan's work is devoted to thorough enunciation and comparison of the many distinct forms of numinous experience within each of the prototaxic, parataxic and syntactic hierarchies.

5.7 Blavatsky's Extraordinary Experiences Classified

In attempting to distinguish the types of experience reported by, or about, Madame Blavatsky, a certain unavoidable judgment must be made about the quality, content, and significance of those experiences. This too must factor in the likelihood that certain portions are unavoidably inaccurate or incomplete, owing to either lack or distortion of factual detail via by Blavatsky herself or to the intentional or unconscious misrepresentations of those recording anecdotal impressions. We can only rely on a finite number of sources. Specifically, commentary made by acquaintances, colleagues, friends, foes, biographers, and Blavatsky herself. And even statements made by individuals are not necessarily consistent, as opinions change over time as a result of continued reflection and input of new knowledge. Blavatsky herself incessantly revised and reinterpreted events, stimulated by a variety of motives, so even her statements are not consistent. Thus, the following analysis can only be selective, based on a choice of materials that appear to be most credible. We shall only make note of relevant examples, and emphasise that a thorough and comprehensive biography is outside of our purview. Right now, we are primarily interested in the types of "numinous," "abnormal," "extrasensory" experiences which can be adequately evaluated and classified, even if just theoretically.

In our choice of examples we also add a further qualification. The instances we have selected of Blavatsky's alleged supersensory and spiritually significant experiences all came before the formation of the Theosophical Society and her emerging controversial reputation as a public figure. Once the theosophical movement became institutionalised, and her foundational role was acknowledged, her statements, claims, declarations, theories, as well as private life and history became the objects of much more intensive scrutiny. By sceptical critics, enthusiastic supporters, and the curious public.

When she subsequently became the central figure in a variety of unresolved

scenarios purportedly involving psychic phenomena, she no longer was just representing herself as a private individual, but as the dominant proselytiser of an institution offering an alternative cognitive worldview to the public for consideration and comparison. As a critical challenger to the entrenched traditions, not only was the formal theoretical edifice of ideas and beliefs perceived to be open to critique, analyses, rebuttal. The self-proclaimed “messenger” became the target as much (if not more) than the “message” she was trying to legitimate and entrench. Therefore we have intentionally limited our choice of examples to the period before her Theosophical Society status made her a public enthusiast for a specific vested interest organisation. As a “private person” without public affiliation to any formal institution, her activities and experiences represented no one but herself. As a leading organisational figure, everything related or attributed to her reflected on the credibility of the Theosophical Society.

When the early phase of Blavatsky’s life is examined, there are many references to unusual occurrences and experiences. Most information has come from letters and commentary from her family, largely her sister Vera and aunt Nadya, as well as personal reflections and statements, mostly recorded by others. She co-operated reluctantly with her first biographer, A. P. Sinnett in supplying some information used in his *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky*. However, much was omitted or meant to be evasive. Amongst the kinds of unusual experiences noted in the early life of Helena Petrovna von Hahn were phenomena that would appear to largely derive from spontaneous creative and imaginative activities. There are a number of anecdotes and recollections dealing with her story telling, hypersensitivity to objects and environment, conviction that there was a fluidic continuum between the worlds of the living and the dead, and that nature in its entirety was dynamically alive and active. For instance, there are recollections about her picking up stones, fossils, stuffed animals, and creating elaborate spellbinding narratives about their origins, histories, destinies, spanning millennia and successive incarnations.²⁰ She also was found apparently conducting hypnotic experiments on pigeons during this time,²¹ as well as claiming to experience a variety of visions and unusual occurrences. This anecdote told by her sister is representative.

²⁰ Cranston, op. cit. p. 29.

²¹ Meade, op. cit. p. 39.

She had selected the uncanny region as a safe refuge where she could avoid her lessons. A long time passed before her secret was found out, and whenever she was found missing, a deputation of strong-bodied servant men was despatched in search of her. She had erected for herself a tower out of old broken chairs and tables in a corner under an iron-barred window, high up in the ceiling of the vault, and there she would hide for hours, reading a book known as "Solomon's Wisdom," in which every kind of popular legend was taught. Once or twice she could hardly be found in those damp subterranean corridors, having in her endeavours to escape detection lost her way in the labyrinth. For all this she was not in the least daunted or repentant, for, as she assured us, she was never there alone, but in the company of "beings" she used to call her little "hunch-backs!" and playmates. Intensely nervous and sensitive, speaking loud, and often walking in her sleep, she used to be found at nights in the most out-of-way places, and to be carried back to her bed profoundly asleep. Thus she was missed from her room one night when she was hardly twelve, and the alarm having been given, she was searched for and found pacing one of the long subterranean corridors, evidently in deep conversation with someone invisible for all but herself. She was the strangest girl one has ever seen, one with a distinct dual nature in her, that made one think there were two beings in one and the same body; one mischievous, combative, and obstinate every way graceless; the other mystical and metaphysically inclined. No schoolboy was ever more uncontrollable or full of the most unimaginable and daring pranks as she was. At the same time, when the paroxysm of mischief-making had run its course, no old scholar could be more assiduous in his study, and she could not be prevailed to give up her books, which she would devour night and day as long as the impulse lasted. The enormous library of her grandparents seemed then hardly large enough to satisfy her cravings.²²

Although apparently excessive, this kind of imaginative indulgence is in itself not necessarily unusual at the pre-adolescent age, and usually disappears or recedes with the process of maturation. However, with Helena, this highly attuned sensitivity and inventiveness remained a constant in her makeup. It is also important to note that she had access to an extensive library maintained by her grandfather, which contained a significant amount of occult and metaphysical materials, which she was attracted to and eagerly digested. Apparently even at a young age she was searching for the elements of an ideational framework by which to interpret, explain, justify, embellish, what seemed to spontaneously manifest through her imaginative faculties.

... HPB apparently was not satisfied to be merely the visible focus for such

²²Daniel H. Caldwell, *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky: Reminiscences and Impressions By Those Who Knew Her*, retrieved from The Theosophical Society in America, 2001, <<http://www.theosophical.org/theosophy/books/esotericworld/chapter01/index.html>>. (Accessed April 7, 2002).

manifestations, she wished to understand them, as well as her own developing psychic powers.²³

The observation that she seemed to display contrasting personality traits, that there “were two beings in one and the same body” also indicates how the lure and sway of the imaginative was tempered by a more controlled and reality-based set of characteristics. As well, the somnambulistic experiences show that her susceptibility to imaginative absorption was not entirely voluntary or intentional, but at least partially a product of unconscious and depersonalised forces. And the graphic details of her narratives must also be recognised as emerging from the depths of the unconscious as well being a response to childhood emotional stimuli. Cranston’s statement about Blavatsky wishing to understand her own “developing psychic powers” presumes at least some, if not most, phenomena were perceived to have an occult foundation. This is, of course, a later interpretation, expressed by Blavatsky herself and repeated by her supporters. However, it is not a hypothesis necessary to explain all varieties of subjective occurrence.

Using Gowan’s taxonomy, these childhood forms of experience would clearly seem to be dominantly prototaxic in a very early stage. There is passivity implicit in the immature personality. The phenomena manifest spontaneously and appear dissociated from the personal ego. There is an authentic feeling of the numinous in respect to the sense of awe, energy, and “otherness,” but perception and cognition is primarily depersonalised and general. This stage would mostly expressed as

... pertaining to that class of experiences which are dissociated and uncanny—outside the pale of rational explanation or control of the developing child.²⁴

Besides these more intensive early imaginative experiences, another order of phenomena appears to have been present. These may be seen to be more unusual and perhaps deviate towards the category of extrasensory perception. Such phenomena as the production of “raps,” automatic writing, mediumistic phenomena, telepathic contact, apparitions of, and communication with the dead, and so on are usually so classified. Blavatsky was alleged to have been able to effectively produce and demonstrate before

²³ Cranston, op. cit. p. 30.

²⁴ Gowan, *Trance, Art and Creativity*, op. cit., p. 25.

witnesses' examples of many such phenomena from an early age and throughout her life. Her sister again recounts an early typical scenario.

All those who were living in the house remarked that strange things were taking place in it. Raps and whisperings, sounds, mysterious and unexplained, were now being constantly heard wherever the newly arrived inmate [Blavatsky] went. That such raps could be increased or diminished, and at times, made to cease altogether by the mere force of her will, she acknowledged, proving her assertion generally on the spot...

The sounds were not simple raps ... as they showed extraordinary intelligence, disclosing the past as well as the future to those who held converse through them ... More than that, for they showed the gift of disclosing unexpressed thoughts, i.e., penetrating freely into the most secret recesses of the human mind and divulging past deeds and present intentions.²⁵

Obviously, such phenomena may be explained in a number of ways, from belief in a purely occult cause to dismissal of everything as fraud or delusion. However, hypothetically, it seems reasonable to assume the possibility that at least some such phenomena occurred independent of Blavatsky's possible premeditated manipulation. Whether as genuine psi phenomena, the production of subconscious energies, the results of unknown natural forces, or any other reasonable hypothesis. From the taxonomy listed previously, it would seem that some of these kinds of phenomena appear to evolve from the primarily prototaxic stage, when unusual incidents appear spontaneously and there is no controlling ego. However, where there is evidence of a unified and directing ego or personality, such manifestations reflect a different developmental stage, which Blavatsky seems to have been able to demonstrate on occasion. Gowan sees mediumistic states as possibly covering a continuum ranging from uncontrolled spontaneous manifestations to more intentionally induced phenomena.

As he evolves a more conscious relationship with his ego and consequently his ability to control his connection with the numinous element, he is able to allow his id greater expression without losing control. Thus, as he ascends the ladder of ego development man is able to achieve what is absent from the prototaxic mode – the clear artistry of expression, the creative utilization of energies which in the prototaxic mode are diffused and undisciplined, without significant organization into the unknowing and unknown.²⁶

Another unusual practice exhibited by Madame Blavatsky appears to have its

²⁵ Cranston, op. cit. pp. 66-67.

roots in hypnotism and takes the form of influence or control over suggestible subjects. Although represented as a manifestation of more complex supersensory powers, it appears the following example can be adequately understood as a phenomenon based on exercise of hypnotic skills. In a discussion with her sceptical father and brother about the claims of mediums, Blavatsky attempted to demonstrate how the power of the mind could seemingly control matter, successfully producing miraculous results. Her objective was to show that a normal chess table could be made to appear so heavy that it would be impossible to lift. After a volunteer first affirmed the table was normal, the experiment began. Without touching the table, she asked everybody to stand back and leave it alone.

The order was at once obeyed, and a great silence fell upon the company. All holding their breath, anxiously watched for what Mme. Blavatsky would do next. She apparently, however, did nothing at all. She merely fixed her large blue eyes upon the chess table, and kept looking at it with an intense gaze. Then without removing her gaze, she silently, with a motion of her hand, invited the same young man to remove it. He approached, and grasped the table by its legs with great assurance. The table could not be moved! He then seized it with both his hands. The table stood as though screwed to the floor. He grew red with the effort, but all in vain!

There was a loud burst of applause. The young man, looking very much confused, slowly said, "Well, this is a god joke!"

"Indeed it is a good one!" echoed Leonid [her brother]. A suspicion had crossed his mind that the young visitor was acting in secret confederacy with his sister.

"May I also try?" he suddenly asked her.

"Please do, my dear," was the laughing response.

Her brother, upon this, approached, smiling, and seized the table by its legs. But the smile instantly vanished, to give an expression of mute amazement. He gave it a tremendous kick, but the little table did not even budge. Applying to its surface his powerful chest he enclosed it. "How strange!" he said, with a wild expression of astonishment.

Addressing him with her usual careless laugh, HPB said, "Try and lift it now."

Pulling it upward by a leg, Leonid nearly dislocated his arm. It lifted like a feather.²⁷

These types of public demonstrations helped shape Blavatsky's reputation as an evoker of mysterious phenomena. Although possible explanations such as collusion, deception, exaggeration, and hypnotic suggestion are at least feasible. For instance, this example is typical of hypnotic demonstrations, where suggestibility produces belief that the laws of

²⁶ Gowan, op. cit., pp. 171-172.

²⁷ Cranston, op. cit. pp. 68-69.

nature may be subverted. However, Blavatsky and those who believe in her psychic skills have used such examples as literal evidence of her supersensory prowess. For example in her description of this particular phenomenon, she gave A. P. Sinnett this explanation.

Madame Blavatsky has stated that this phenomenon could be produced in two different ways: 1st. Through the exercise of her own will directing the magnetic currents so that the pressure on the table became such that no physical force could move it; and 2nd, through the action of those beings with whom she was in constant communication, and who, although unseen, were able to hold the table against all opposition.²⁸

If her explanation were accepted at face value, it most likely would be classified in Gowan's taxonomy as an example of the syntactic side of trance in regards to its paranormal elements. More particularly, as one of the powers or "siddhis" pertaining to altered states of consciousness.

In the process of mind-expansion man acquires, as a by-product of his development, the possibility of some unusual powers. These powers are known as *siddhis*, seldom seen naturally but are said to be "developed" by yogis and others as a result of spiritual training. ... The *siddhis* also are related to the paranormal aspect of trance except that in the syntactic mode it is not necessary to go into trance to induce them.²⁹

On the other hand, if this example is scrutinised and assumed to be a form of hypnotic suggestion, then it would be comparable to phenomena of the trance category, and more properly belong to the prototaxic stage

Hypnosis is a broad phenomenon exhibiting an wide variety of behaviours. Its significance to the prototaxic modality is that it introduces and utilizes basic processes which are consistently in evidence in the increasingly more dissociative states of the prototaxic continuum.³⁰

The possible veridical accuracy of these or any other explanations is not the issue here. What is important to note though is that the doctrinaire occult position is reiterated (even stated with two plausible options) to account for a phenomenon intended to demonstrate the legitimacy of psychic powers. Even if causes such as deception or collusion are eliminated, the plausibility of a hypnotic basis is at least logical. More naturalistic explanations however would not convey the same sense of mystery, and turn a

²⁸ Ibid. p. 69.

²⁹ Gowan, op. cit., p. 264.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

demonstration that is intended to inspire awe and belief in extraordinary powers into a mere example of skilled hypnotic technique. However, evaluation of the cause of such phenomena is not a main issue. In considering the possibility of an occult or naturalistic explanation, we see that the former adds to the mystique Blavatsky was nurturing while the latter would only imply manipulative intentions. So obviously it was to Blavatsky's self-interest to promote the occult explanation and enhance her reputation as an accomplished practitioner of the occult arts.

As Blavatsky travelled and gained experience by exposure to different esoteric traditions, cultivation of skills and techniques as well as knowledge about the theoretical basis of occultism, was added to her expertise. Eventually, the seemingly spontaneous and random manifestations of psychic energies diminished. Instead, Blavatsky now appeared to be more in control, or, at least, cognisant of, the forces of her own psyche. After passing through a medical crisis in 1860, this change was apparent to her sister.

Her occult powers, all this while, instead of weakening, became every day stronger, and she seemed finally to subject to her direct will every kind of manifestation. The whole country was talking of her. The superstitious nobility began very soon to regard her as a magician, and people came from afar off to consult her about their private affairs. She had long since given up communication through raps, and preferred what was a far more rapid and satisfactory method to answer people either verbally or by means of direct writing. At times, during such process, Mme. Blavatsky seemed to fall into a kind of coma, or magnetic sleep, with eyes wide open, though even then her hand never ceased to move, and continued this writing. When thus answering to mental questions, the answers were rarely unsatisfactory. Generally they astonished the querists' friends and enemies. Meanwhile sporadic phenomena were gradually dying away in her presence. They still occurred, but very rarely, though they were always very remarkable.³¹

Here we see that her capacities were still largely grounded more directly in the subconscious, under a form of mediumistic trance if reports of "coma or magnetic sleep" are accurate. Although it is difficult to differentiate between what may have been consciously under the control of the will and what may have appeared intuitively or spontaneously, public recognition of her unusual skills and methods became more widespread. Using the taxonomy of Gowan, we see that this profile indicates a number of

³¹ Caldwell, op. cit., <<http://www.theosophical.org/theosophy/books/esotericworld/chapter02/index.html>>

things. In general, because the exercise of will becomes more dominant, the movement seems to be away from the spontaneous prototaxic type phenomena more towards parataxic and syntactic levels. However, trance clearly indicates the absence of the ego, and thus is primarily prototaxic. Automatic writing is more problematic to classify.

We can only conclude that automatic writing is a feature of the continuum of psychic development, and not a characteristic of any particular stage.³²

Thus, it would appear that Blavatsky experienced a diverse number of unusual states or conditions, some involuntary manifestations, some under control of the will, and others perhaps grounded upon more manipulative forms of behaviour. Her charismatic presence is also becoming more pervasive as the reputation as a “magician” would indicate some sense of awe and belief in special personalised powers.

Another possible contributing element to her fluency with unusual experiences, and perhaps altered states of consciousness, rests on a more controversial hypothesis. Very rarely in the sympathetic biographical materials is there discussion of Blavatsky’s alleged use of hallucinogenic substances as a stimulant to enhanced vision or altered states of consciousness. Blavatsky herself formally advises against the use of stimulants, and does not properly acknowledge personal experimentation or influence from such sources. However, some critics have gone to the opposite extreme, dismissing all of her work as merely a by-product of such indulgences. For example, this casual generalisation about the writing of *Isis Unveiled*.

... she wrote most of it under the influence of marijuana.³³

What can be inferred along those lines comes primarily from the statements of two different and unconnected friends whom she knew before her career in Theosophy began. The first statement came in 1874 from Mrs. Hannah Shepard Wolff, a reporter, who had met and befriended Blavatsky in New York before she became a public figure. She had this comment in recollecting her acquaintance.

I soon learned that she was addicted to the use of hashish. She several times endeavoured to persuade me to try the effect upon myself. She said that she had smoked opium, seen its visions and dreamed its dreams, but that the beatitudes enjoyed in the use of hashish were as heaven to its hell. She said she found

³² Gowan, op. cit., p. 162.

³³ Louis Stewart, *Life Forces - a Contemporary Guide to the Cult and the Occult*: Kansas City/New York/Washington: Andrews and McNeel Inc., 1980, p. 482.

nothing to compare with its effects in arousing and stimulating the imagination.³⁴ This sort of hearsay statement may or may not be credible on its own. However, when linked with comments from a more trustworthy and independent source, appears to at least corroborate this line of reasoning. Albert Leighton Rawson was an artist and Orientalist, having written dictionaries in Persian, Turkish and Arabic, and produced thousands of engravings during his travels. He first met Madame Blavatsky in Cairo in 1851 when each was pursuing first-hand acquisition of esoteric knowledge. For a time they collaborated in this quest. He again met her in 1875 in New York. In February 1892, not long after Blavatsky's death, he had these recollections published in Frank Leslie's *Popular Monthly*.

She had tried hasheesh in Cairo with success, and again indulged in it in this city [New York] under the care of myself and Dr. Edward Sutton Smith, who had a large experience with the drug among his patients at Mount Lebanon, Syria. She said: "Hasheesh multiplies one's life a thousandfold. My experiences are as real as if they were ordinary events of actual life. Ah! I have the explanation. It is a recollection of my former existence, my previous incarnation. It is a wonderful drug and clears up a profound mystery."³⁵

Of course, such statements may be false or grossly exaggerated. As well, Blavatsky may have been embellishing conversation and indulging in romantic hyperbole. Yet it still would seem fair to think that two such independent statements would at least indicate a potential likelihood that hallucinogenic substances may have played some role in Blavatsky's experiential mix. Especially bearing in mind the accepted belief of the time in the medicinal value of certain such materials. As well, the use of such stimulants to visionary experience is a familiar procedure in the practical operations of shamans. As we shall see in chapter eight, Blavatsky can be evaluated by such criteria. And thus, hypothetically, we find that if classified according to the foregoing taxonomy, this form of experience has a double function.

Psychoactive drugs are included in the prototaxic mode because of their dissociative and regressive features. However, their regressive character need not be delineated as negatively valued ... It is in this vein that the proactive drug states can be viewed as a "regression in the service of the ego"—or ego-consent, superego excursive behaviour.³⁶

³⁴ Cited in John Symonds, *Madame Blavatsky: Medium and Magician*: Long Acre, London: Odhams Press Ltd., 1959, p. 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Gowan, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

If she did utilise hashish or some variant in the service of visionary enhancement, it may have triggered subjective processes that activated or drew upon ideas, images, symbols, already part of her own mental inventory, both personal and derived from her esoteric interests.

One of the most interesting properties of psychoactive drugs is the amazing variety of states they may induce. Much of what one experiences appears not to depend on the drug which only acts as a catalyst, but what is already in the preconscious, only waiting to be disclosed. The drug functions like a theatre ticket which gets you to your seat; but what you see depends upon the particular play or movie you have chosen.³⁷

As well as the possible imaginative, mediumistic, hypnotic, and chemically induced types of uncommon experience that Blavatsky was involuntarily subject to or may have intentionally cultivated, there was a more personally affective and qualitatively significant aspect. This began at first as visions and dreams of a figure she interpreted as her “guardian angel.”

... she saw an adult male—handsome, virile, wise, protective and ... invisible. A psychiatrist might have contended that she had devised a father figure, but Helena had a completely different interpretation of the events that began to take place.³⁸

The young Blavatsky believed the intervention of this figure twice saved her from serious accidents through mysterious and unusual means. And the belief in the self-subsistent authenticity of this entity took on a more intense confirmatory feeling on her twentieth birthday in London, when she claims to have met and spoken in person to this personage. This is how her sister recounts the story.

In London, in 1851, she was one day out walking when, to her astonishment, she saw a tall Hindu in the street with some Indian princes. She immediately recognized him as the same person that she had seen in the Astral. Her first impulse was to rush forward to speak to him, but he made her a sign not to move, and she stood as if spellbound while he passed on. The next day she went into Hyde Park for a stroll, that she might be alone and free to think over her extraordinary adventure. Looking up, she saw the same form approaching her, and then her Master told her that he had come to London with the Indian princes on an important mission, and he was desirous of meeting her personally, as he required her cooperation in a work which he was about to undertake. He then told her how the Theosophical Society was to be formed, and that he wished her to be

³⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁸ Meade, *op. cit.* p. 43.

the founder. He gave her a slight sketch of all the troubles she would have to undergo, and also told her that she would have to spend three years in Tibet to prepare her for the important task. HPB decided to accept the offer made to her and shortly afterwards left London for India.³⁹

As we shall see in the next chapter, there are a number of theories that have been proposed concerning these Masters. What is important to note now is that Blavatsky's personal cognisance of, and emotional attachment to, her Master had become the dominant theme in her own life. In her Sketchbook the entry dated August 12 1851 makes the following statement.

Memorable night! On a certain night by the light of the moon that was setting at Ramsgate on August 12th 1851 when I met [symbol] the Master of my dreams!⁴⁰

As was a typical practice in insuring a certain amount of ambiguity about her private life, Blavatsky admits that Ramsgate was substituted for London as a "blind" to confuse any who may have been privy to her personal papers. However, it is significant that we now see that the previously subjective, private symbol or image of the Master has unequivocally been located at least partially in the public physical world. He now is perceived to have a tangible as well as ethereal presence and to be active in human form.

The emotional and devotional connection between Blavatsky, her Master, and the wider Brotherhood of Adepts forms the nucleus of her most private and spiritual interests. We have briefly illustrated some of the kinds of unusual, distinctive, abnormal, possibly extrasensory subjective experiences Blavatsky personally was involved with. Though interesting in their own right, most are not intrinsically spiritual or profound. In her own private life, the most vivid expressions of spiritual sentiment can be traced to her dedication and commitment to the belief in the active presence of the Masters. Manifestations of unconscious processes or exercise of unusual skills does not in itself embody religious or spiritual values. However, when Blavatsky discusses the Masters, she often reveals a personal emotional commitment besides reiterating the narrative of their origins and purpose. On the one hand, the Masters serve as integral elements of the

³⁹ Caldwell, op. cit., <<http://www.theosophical.org/theosophy/books/esotericworld/chapter02/index.html>>.

⁴⁰ H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings Vol. 1: 1874 – 1878*, Wheaton/Madras/London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1977, p. 4.

theosophical ideational system, providing a quasi-mythical stature to the edifice of ideas and beliefs. On the other, Blavatsky's expression of personal devotion and unyielding faith is often phrased in guru-chela relationship terms.

Thus, it serves as a genuine vehicle for Bhakti type, devotion based, mystical ambitions. Regardless of the possible origins and fusion of the disparate elements coalescing into the doctrine of the Mahatmas, Blavatsky's personal spiritual foundation is dependent on the perpetuation of an ongoing devotional relationship between her and a personally idealised image of spiritually perfected humankind. These words, quoting from one of her letters, seem to indicate that Blavatsky had been subject to this form of mystical realisation.

... among the principal teachings of theosophy there is one that runs through the entire cycle of H. P. Blavatsky's guidance. This, the most important of all, is that of the inner divinity in man and of the possibility of becoming united with it. This is the fundamental basis of universal brotherhood. H.P.B. had realized this mystical illumination in a high degree, and was therefore qualified to point the way to others. She speaks of my inner Self which but for His [her Master Morya] calling it out, awakening it from its slumber, would have never come to conscious being—not in this life, at all events; . . . ⁴¹

Thus considered, this form of experience would have to be located at the parataxic and syntactic levels. The ego is fully cognisant and actively engaged, even when the qualitative nature of the experience may appear overwhelming and awe-inspiring. The assumption that there would be variations of the quality, intensity, numinosity of the experiences perhaps explain how she was able to refer to the Masters in multiple ways. It would also seem that some of her experiences were of the mystical or deeply affective variety while at other times, more prosaic attitudes and motives informed her statements. The lifelong reoccurrence of similar experiences also led to a refinement of the conceptual representation of these numinous episodes. Her subjective experiences or impressions, both numinous and not, were combined and treated from the esoteric ideational perspective, acquiring a singular theosophical explanatory rationale, phrased in theosophical terminology, and substantiated by reference to theosophical doctrine.

And, as the primary theoretician for the theosophical position, Blavatsky had to

⁴¹ Charles J. Ryan, *H. P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Movement*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1975, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/hpb-tm/hpbtm-6.htm>>. (Accessed April 8, 2002).

present a convincing argument for the rejection of status quo entrenched views and the adoption of a radically different and more dynamic notion of the potentialities of human experience. Rejecting the prevailing materialistic view of human consciousness as an epiphenomenon of matter, and the dogmatic classifications of Christian convention, a broader and more dynamic model of human consciousness was sought. With her own personal capacity to engage in altered, enhanced, or extended states of consciousness serving to justify such convictions, more general and universal arguments would be needed to win public support.

As she did for most fundamental theosophical principles and beliefs, Blavatsky wrote an extensive amount about the experience of supersensory phenomena and spiritual states of consciousness. Once more, to more closely follow her methods of rehabilitating disputable content and arguing for its legitimation, we shall choose a representative article. Again, it must be repeated that her articles are self-contained summations of specific topics and issues intended for public consumption. Analysing her articles is very useful in acquiring a sense of how she dealt with particular concerns at a specific time. As our intended objective is to understand her methods and techniques of legitimating controversial and minority cognitive positions, concentration on representative independent articles serves to accentuate the process itself, while yet clarifying the actual content of the subject matter.

With a personal background of familiarity with a variety of abnormal and unusual states of consciousness, Madame Blavatsky was able to present a self-assured overview of the potentialities of human experience. However, her motivation was not to simply enunciate and describe the alleged supersensory skills or qualities relating to such forms of experience. Her efforts were directed towards providing a proper contextual understanding of what those phenomena mean. Her context was the occult tradition, as she perceived it, culminating in the ongoing theosophical endeavour. Blavatsky discusses the topic and all its ramifications in many of her writings. We will analyse the article *Occultism Versus the Occult Arts*, written in 1888 and published in *Lucifer*, as a representative example of how she attempted to legitimate the belief in the supersensory potentiality of human experience.

5.8 Analysis of Blavatsky's Article *Occultism Versus the Occult Arts*

The article begins by noting that an earlier discourse on practical occultism provoked responses that showed both a belief in the credibility of occult phenomena, but also a misunderstanding about its real nature. The discussion becomes more specific and focuses on the question of how psychic powers may be acquired and utilised. So the issue is not whether they exist, which is implicitly affirmed, but what they actually are and how they may be cultivated. She says that amongst the misconceptions is the belief that one simply may go to India and instantly become proficient in occultism; that emulating a character like *Zanoni* is sufficient; that idealising the quest for powers is enough to transform one into a legitimate adept; and that following the rules of ceremonial magic as enunciated by Eliphas Levi is an adequate method. These common misconceptions just illustrate the inaccuracies popularly held by those without the proper background, knowledge, and experience.

Madame Blavatsky then claims that she has more accurate and factual authoritative insight about authentic occultism, and bluntly confronts and challenges those holding partial and inaccurate positions. She explicitly intends to try and correct those that she feels are deluded by false ideas. This task is felt to be an urgent one, but one that must be engaged in before it becomes too late. As well, she sees her role as one of persuasion, trying to show that that her perspective is the most historically authentic and accurate. And to emphasise her point, she condescendingly notes that not more than a tiny percentage of aspiring occultists are on the right path. And, for more dramatic impact, she even warns such misguided individuals that they are potentially opening themselves up to danger and delusion because they are dabbling with sorcery. So competing occult views are not only misleading, they are potentially dangerous and pernicious. Protests, rationalisations and denials are of no avail unless the proper orientation is adopted.

Let them restore some order in the chaos that reigns in their minds, before they protest against this statement. Let them first learn the true relation in which the Occult Sciences stand to Occultism, and the difference between the two, and then feel wrathful if they still think themselves right. Meanwhile, let them learn that Occultism differs from Magic and other secret Sciences as the glorious sun does from a rush-light, as the immutable and immortal Spirit of Man reflection of the

absolute, causeless and unknowable ALL—differs from the mortal clay—the human body.⁴²

Blavatsky rhetorically places herself in a position of authority, lecturing down to those she feels deserve admonition and redress. This is born out by her language. “Let them restore,” “let them first learn,” “let them learn,” are phrases that obviously assume others to be in need of correction. And challenging such people to engage in critical introspection seems to indicate a sense of pedagogical superiority and impatience. This tone of self-righteousness occurs because she vociferously insists that she is privy to the authentic methodology of occultism, and therefore is qualified through knowledge and experience to recognise the illusions and delusions of the inauthentic path. .

She then turns the argument to linguistic speculation, claiming that Western languages, shaped by culturally embedded prioritisation of selfishness and pursuit of materialistic goals, lack the necessary subtleness to differentiate between the different states of consciousness. Thus the highly required formulation of newer and more accurate terms has been neglected, necessitating the continued usage of older superstitious words, despite all the misleading connotations that they carry from centuries of generic use. This argumentative thread is very revealing. It continues to express Blavatsky’s vision of a strictly polarised gulf between Western and Eastern worldviews. From her perspective, Western priorities differed from those of the East, and the respective languages reflected that difference. The terms that she was trying to rehabilitate, “magic,” “sorcery,” “occultism,” etc., had accrued many negative connotations over the span of history and required great effort to present in a more reputable light. On the other hand, she insisted that Eastern languages were innately more conducive in defining and examining phenomena pertaining to a variety of states of consciousness. The major issue may be perceived as a difference in the Western and Eastern evaluation of “abnormal powers.” Blavatsky notes that the terms of contempt familiar in her time (such as “jugglery,” “crass ignorance,” “sorry relic,” “crank brained,” “thimble-rigging”), were applied to areas of experience that have, on the contrary, been accorded respectful esteem in Eastern thought. But through centuries of contempt, neglect, disinterest, disputability,

⁴² H.P. Blavatsky, *Occultism Versus the Occult Arts*, retrieved from Blavatsky Net Foundation, 1888, < <http://www.blavatsky.net/blavatsky/arts/OccultismVersusTheOccultArts.htm>>. (Accessed April 9, 2002).

disrespectability, there has been little Western effort to incorporate such controversial conceptual materials into mainstream traditions. Only within the framework of the marginalized alternative of esoteric knowledge is consensual validation accorded such phenomena.

And using a Hindu frame of reference, she articulates the division of occult knowledge into four categories. The first is Yajna-Vidya, or knowledge of the occult powers awakened in Nature through ceremonial and ritualistic activities. The second is Maha-Vidya, the magical methods found in Tantric and Kabbalistic practices and considered by Blavatsky to be the worst form of sorcery. The third is Guhya-Vidya, or magical practices based on proper use of sound, as exemplified in mantras and prayers. And the fourth is the most esteemed and comprehensive.

ATMA-VIDYA, a term which is translated simply "knowledge of the Soul," true Wisdom by the Orientalists, but which means far more. This last is the only kind of Occultism that any theosophist ... would be wise and unselfish, ought to strive after. All the rest is some branch of the "Occult Sciences," i.e., arts based on the knowledge of the ultimate essence of all things in the Kingdoms of Nature.⁴³

This classification differentiates between specific categories of supersensory experience, encompassing what may be interpreted as psychic, magical and mystical elements. She feels that they all relate to legitimate phenomena and spheres of theoretical and practical knowledge, but it is only the highest mystical aspiration of "ATMA-VIDYA," "knowledge of the Soul," that should be the priority of theosophists. Blavatsky implies that the other categories are not intrinsically spiritually directed, but more concerned with particular aspects of occult theory and practice. Those are the occult arts that may be acquired and utilised by those who study and master the necessary techniques. The occult faculties may be brought from latency to potency, and reveal a more expansive and vibrant universe than represented by empirical science.

Alchemy, Astrology, Occult Physiology, Chiromancy, exist in Nature and the exact Sciences—perhaps so called, because they are found in this age of paradoxical philosophies the reverse—have already discovered not a few of the secrets of the above arts. But clairvoyance ... is not Hypnotism, the illegitimate son of Mesmerism, and is not to be acquired by such arts. All the others may be mastered and results obtained, whether good, bad or indifferent; but Atma-Vidya

⁴³ Ibid.

sets small value on them. It includes them all and may even use them occasionally, but it does so after purifying them of their dross, for beneficent purposes, and taking care to deprive them of every element of selfish motive.⁴⁴

Atma-Vidya is clearly set apart, with a distinguishing criterion noted. That is the elimination “of every element of selfish motive.” All occult branches may be independently pursued to a successful though limited end, but that is not the goal that is being sought after. Although Atma-Vidya includes the mastery of such powers, they must first be purified and cleansed of all selfish intentions, directed to “beneficent purposes” before being incorporated into the more encompassing and spiritually directed discipline.

The acquisition of supersensory powers itself is not considered a significant obstacle, since study of esoteric teachings and disciplined practice are believed to methodically lead to progress along those lines. And pursuing this path as an end unto itself does not even necessarily require a dramatic change in lifestyle or moral stance. The result however of such an amoral approach is seen to be the inevitable descent into the quagmire of “black magic,” with its long-term destructive effects. Blavatsky’s show of disgust and contempt for any approach to the occult as an end-unto-itself without moral prerequisites is couched in that most derogatory of phrases, which suggests the epitome of degradation and perversity. And the image of an efficient but amoral and selfish sorcerer is often used as a negative role model in contrast to the noble, selfless spiritual seeker.

To complete her graphic description of what she feels are the lowest depths to which a person may sink, the practitioners of black magic are equated with the materialistically inclined contemporary exponents of medical practices deemed cruel or degrading. Interestingly, Madame Blavatsky equates vivisectionists with “hypnotisers.” Apparently, non-spiritually grounded medical experimentation in hypnotism was as much an evil as the inhumane practice of vivisection. And such contemporary medical experimentation in any event was contemptuously dismissed as the inadvertent dabbling in magic by those unaware that they even were dealing in occult matters. Blavatsky’s key point of contention is that discipline and proper understanding are essential prerequisites for any efforts along occult lines. Those who abandon Atma-Vidya or Occultism because

⁴⁴ Ibid.

it is too demanding are only doing harm to themselves in thinking shortcuts will be as efficacious. Dabbling in magic and descending to the lowest levels of “Voodoos and Dugpas” will have long-term ramifications extending over several incarnations. And, even lower on the scale are the unconscious sorcerers of the medical field who don’t even give the acknowledgment of indulging in sorcery. So by engaging in what she feels is unconscious sorcery, there is even more culpability than there would be by simply affirming that one was engaged in activities explicable only outside the sphere of the empirical.

Madame Blavatsky however recognises that not all those interested in occultism are fully cognisant of what taking the proper path entails. She repeats the caution that commitment to occult objectives may be more demanding than anticipated, and that mastery of the passions and unselfish behaviour are prerequisite necessities. She next paints a poignant picture of the prototypical aspirant.

How about these unfortunates, we shall be asked, who are thus rent in twain by conflicting forces? For it has been said too often to need repetition, and the fact itself is patent to any observer, that when once the desire for Occultism has really awakened in a man's heart, there remains for him no hope of peace, no place of rest and comfort in all the world. He is driven out into the wild and desolate spaces of life by an ever-gnawing unrest he cannot quell. His heart is too full of passion and selfish desire to permit him to pass the Golden Gate; he cannot find rest or peace in ordinary life. Must he then inevitably fall into sorcery and black magic, and through many incarnations heap up for himself a terrible Karma? Is there no other road for him? ⁴⁵

Whether or not this portrayal is drawn from personal experience can only be surmised. However, it does seem to be expressed with emotion and conviction. The language used clearly is meant to be inspirational and evoke empathetic response. The imagery is especially transparent, painting a picture of the spiritual quest dominated by “conflicting forces.” While this nameless seeker is driven by spiritual aspirations, he yet is not disciplined or focussed enough to attain the satisfaction sought after. The unwelcome possibility of a quick descent into black magic, and “a terrible Karma” lasting many lifetimes looms as a potential risk. Blavatsky emphasises the grave circumstances and the repercussions of taking the wrong path, which are severe and will effectively bring about long-term regression. Yet, in posing the rhetorical question, the possibility of another

option is hinted at.

This is a somewhat intermediary path. One more dedicated to spiritual values, but not fully committed to the highest and most demanding form of the esoteric way of life. It is, however, a positive and productive step, and diametrically different than the indulgence in the forms of sorcery so derided.

Let him aspire to no higher than he feels able to accomplish. Let him not take a burden upon himself too heavy for him to carry. Without ever becoming a "Mahatma," a Buddha or a Great Saint, let him study the philosophy and the "Science of Soul," and he can become one of the modest benefactors of humanity, without any superhuman powers.⁴⁶

This somewhat patronising attitude to those unable to sever personal ties and radically redirect their priorities of life is meant as a token compromise, bearing in mind her strict gnostic values. A way is provided to somewhat accommodate those desirous of embarking on the proper path but unable to fully embrace the disciplines and make the sacrifices deemed necessary. The compromised position is portrayed as one in which knowledge may be acquired, but practical acquisition and utilisation of "any superhuman powers" is denied. So rather than the ideal of a Mahatma to aspire to, the more modest aim of becoming a "benefactor of humanity" is encouraged. However, Blavatsky does not disguise a somewhat condescending attitude directed to those who settle for less than the fullest ideals and undertakings. And those unwilling to act boldly with full commitment.

She again stresses that the proper development of occult powers comes as a result of total life-commitment that includes the probability of sacrifice and hardship. There are no shortcuts, and only a totally selfless, compassionate, and altruistic approach can succeed.

Siddhis (or the Arhat powers) are only for those who are able to "lead the life," to comply with the terrible sacrifices required for such a training, and to comply with them to the very letter. Let them know at once and remember always, that true Occultism or Theosophy is the "Great Renunciation of SELF," unconditionally and absolutely, in thought as in action. It is ALTRUISM, and it throws him who practises it out of calculation of the ranks of the living altogether. "Not for himself, but for the world, he lives," as soon as he has pledged himself to the work.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Selfless dedication to “the work” of self-transformation comes at the cost of personal sacrifices that must be made in order to facilitate proper attitude and training. However, even embarking on the difficult path does not in itself guarantee success. One either has to progress or else risk failure and further long-term karmic entanglements. There is no avoidance of choice and its benefits or repercussions. Blavatsky again illustrates her dualistic approach, because once accepted on the probationary path, the option of compromise is rescinded and the choice is between two possible scenarios. The preferred option is the slow but effective incremental process of step-by-step progress, which eventually will lead to Mahatmaship. The other possibility is presented as an inevitable road to failure through the seeking of easier but devious methods, via less morally grounded forms of occultism. The only possibility Blavatsky sees in her either/or dualistic stance from such failure is an inevitable and immediate descent once more into the despised state of “Dugpaship.”

Another contemporary belief she fervently disputed was that “animal passions” could be sublimated and redirected into spiritual energies.

Indeed, one who is able to follow the silent evolution of the preliminary aspirations of the candidates often finds strange ideas quietly taking possession of their minds. There are those whose reasoning powers have been so distorted by foreign influences that they imagine that animal passions can be so sublimated and elevated that their fury, force, and fire can, so to speak, be turned inwards; that they can be stored and shut up in one's breast, until their energy is, not expanded, but turned toward higher and more holy purposes: namely, until their collective and unexpanded strength enables their possessor to enter the true Sanctuary of the Soul and stand therein in the presence of the Master—the HIGHER SELF! For this purpose they will not struggle with their passions nor slay them. They will simply, by a strong effort of will put down the fierce flames and keep them at bay within their natures, allowing the fire to smoulder under a thin layer of ashes. They submit joyfully to the torture of the Spartan boy who allowed the fox to devour his entrails rather than part with it. Oh, poor blind visionaries!⁴⁸

The key notion behind this criticism is Blavatsky's belief that the process of spiritual illumination is a continual intensive struggle. Not to integrate or accommodate, but to kill the passions by concentrated willpower. She appears to have little patience for those are uncommitted or too weak to engage in the struggle to destroy the passions. Apparently

⁴⁸ Ibid.

she is contemptuous and dismissive of the psychological theory of sublimation, equating the approval of such “strange ideas” to an irrational obsession that possesses naïve minds. The language clearly signifies total disdain for those who believe the theory. The idea of sublimation is attributed to “foreign influences.” And, she believes, may seem convincing only to those who no longer display proper reasoning power. Once more the language used to portray her firm either/or uncompromising position is excessively graphic. The animal passions signify “fury, force and fire,” “fierce flames,” a smouldering fire. Belief that such energies can be “turned inward,” “turned to higher and more holy purposes,” kept at bay, are considered naïve. The “poor blind visionaries” fail to get at the root of the problem as Blavatsky sees it, which is total elimination via intense internal struggle, and mastery and control via supreme willpower. The idea that the process of sublimation could actually be beneficial and eventuate in the highest objective is offensive. Her belief was that there are no shortcuts or ways of avoiding the necessity of total elimination of the passions, as she perceived them to be. To “enter the true Sanctuary of the Soul and stand therein in the presence of the Master—the HIGHER SELF” by any other way than how she envisioned it was illegitimate and tantamount to blasphemy. Obviously, Madame Blavatsky believed that sublimation was some form of ineffective and immoral shortcut, or delusional way of thinking, and totally inauthentic as a means of acquiring higher spiritual insight and experience.

To justify her position, Blavatsky gives a brief synopsis of her view of the metaphysical constitution of man, using that quasi-gnostic schema to argue why the passions are inimical to spiritual progress.

The "Master" in the Sanctuary of our souls is "the Higher Self"—the divine spirit whose consciousness is based upon and derived solely (at any rate during the mortal life of the man in whom it is captive) from the Mind, which we have agreed to call the Human Soul (the "Spiritual Soul" being the vehicle of the Spirit). In its turn the former (the personal or human soul) is a compound in its highest form, of spiritual aspirations, volition, and divine love; and in its lower aspect, of animal desires and terrestrial passions imparted to it by its associations with its vehicle, the seat of all these. It thus stands as a link and a medium between the animal nature of man which its higher reason seeks to subdue, and his divine spiritual nature to which it gravitates, whenever it has the upper hand in its struggle with the inner animal. The latter is the instinctual "animal Soul" and is the hotbed of those passions, which, as just shown, are lulled instead of being killed, and locked up in their breasts by some imprudent enthusiasts. Do they still

hope to turn thereby the muddy stream of the animal sewer into the crystalline waters of life? And where, on what neutral ground can they be imprisoned so as not to affect man? The fierce passions of love and lust are still alive and they are allowed to still remain in the place of their birth—that same animal soul; for both the higher and the lower portions of the "Human Soul" or Mind reject such inmates, though they cannot avoid being tainted with them as neighbours. The "Higher Self" or Spirit is as unable to assimilate such feelings as water to get mixed with oil or unclean liquid tallow. It is thus the mind alone, the sole link and medium between the man of earth and the Higher Self—that is the only sufferer, and which is in the incessant danger of being dragged down by those passions that may be re-awakened at any moment, and perish in the abyss of matter.⁴⁹

Blavatsky here uses the term "Master" as a symbolic equivalent for "Higher Self," not as a reference to the class of spiritually evolved Masters who sponsored her mission. So it seems that the term had both a symbolic and a literal interpretation. In this schema, the Higher Self, or "divine spirit" does not manifest directly to human consciousness, but is diffused, filtered, and personalised through "Mind," or the "Human Soul." A further bifurcation exists at the level of the human or personal soul, which can be analytically perceived as a dualistic compound. The higher portion resonates to the informing Spirit, the lower, to the physical body. This version of the body/mind division attributes "spiritual aspirations, volition, and divine love" to the higher component of the human soul. And the lower portion receives imparted from the body, "animal desires and terrestrial passions." Blavatsky adopts a traditional stance espoused in some religious philosophies (particularly Hellenistic), where the human soul is posited as the locus of the perpetual struggle between the debilitating influences of the animal traits of man and the sublime aspirations intuited from his divine spiritual nature.

Perceiving the human soul as the confluence of higher spiritual and lower animal impulses, tendencies, traits and influences has been a common way of portraying the dynamics of personal, ethical, and spiritual struggle. Blavatsky here addresses the dilemma directly, in a manner not uncommon in traditional Western religious thought. The "animal nature of man" was considered totally negative, distracting and hindering higher spiritual aspirations. "Higher reason" is meant to serve as a wilful influence or power that can be used to gain the advantage in its perpetual struggle with the inner animal. By so controlling and imprisoning the lures and impulses of bodily energies, the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

human soul will be free from constraints and in a position to cultivate the more refined spiritual potentialities that were latent or stymied.

The imprisoning “instinctual animal soul” is portrayed as a “hotbed of those passions” and thus a hindrance to fulfilling a life of the spirit. In this dualistic gnostic outlook, “lulling” is not good enough, but “killing” is the only preferred option. This extreme position is imperative, because even if the residue of the passions remain “locked up in their breasts,” negative results will ultimately eventuate. The distaste Blavatsky shows for the corporeal component of the compound human soul is evident in the language she uses. “The muddy stream of the animal sewer,” “The fierce passions of love and lust are still alive,” “unclean liquid tallow,” “the abyss of matter,” etc. In order to glorify the spiritual component and all things felt to pertain to it, the biological dimension had to be denigrated and despised. And in contrast, the Higher Self is “the only sufferer,” “unable to assimilate such feelings,” and remains at risk of contamination and “being dragged down by those passions that may be re-awakened at any moment, and perish in the abyss of matter.” So the human soul, as the confluence of competing energies, remains vulnerable and in a continually hazardous situation.

Facing such a dilemma, Blavatsky wonders if there is any way to positively triumph under such debilitating circumstances. If the soul is enthralled by the animal passions, then how can it attain proper attunement to the higher spiritual essence to which it aspires? The achievement of the desired form of harmony will be difficult, because the human soul already is “stained and distracted” by the desires and passions of the corporeal portion of the human entity. And the extent of this damage goes even beyond the physical body, and encompasses the influences that the “Astral man” is subject to. The Astral man is an intermediary existent vehicle of personal consciousness native to a plane of existence more subtle than the physical, but yet not accessible to the even more refined states of higher spiritual reality. It is finite and perishable in its own right, and inexorably linked to the human entity. And it also serves as a conduit for personal excursions (allegedly, mostly during sleep) of consciousness into a more fluid and subtle psychic environment. However, although an extension or enhancement of normal consciousness, it is far removed from the truly spiritual states of being, and also must be mastered and deadened before the desired higher states of consciousness may become

operative.

It is only when the power of the passions is dead altogether, and when they have been crushed and annihilated in the retort of an unflinching will; when not only all the lusts and longings of the flesh are dead, but also the recognition of the personal Self is killed out and the "astral" has been reduced in consequence to a cipher, that the Union with the "Higher Self" can take place. Then when the "Astral" reflects only the conquered man, the still living but no more the longing, selfish personality, then the brilliant Augoeides, the divine SELF, can vibrate in conscious harmony with both the poles of the human Entity—the man of matter purified, and the ever pure Spiritual Soul—and stand in the presence of the MASTER SELF, the Christos of the mystic Gnostic, blended, merged into, and one with IT forever.⁵⁰

The astral body is still subservient to the physical during the life of the individual, and not self-sufficient as a vehicle of higher spiritual consciousness.

Blavatsky's radical dualism extends into her interpretation of mystical experience. True mystical consciousness arises only "with the man of matter purified." The "conquered man" must in effect, expunge "the longing, selfish personality." The passions must be "dead altogether," "crushed and annihilated in the retort of an unflinching will." The certitude felt by Blavatsky is reflected by the adamant position she takes. Recognition of the personal self must be "killed" and the "lusts and longings of the flesh" must become "dead." The mystical "union with the Higher Self" is only available to those that entirely purify and conquer their biologically based predispositions and become emotionally detached from their psychological and sociological identities. The "still living but no more longing selfish personality" has to be neutralised and properly attuned to the requisite mystical frequency, where it can "vibrate in conscious harmony" and participate in the ultimate experience, "blended, merged into, and one with IT forever." Here we find the prototypical Blavatskyian interpretation of the way to mystical experience. Realisation only comes through intense and consistent effort to transcend an egocentric orientation. And the faculty most applicable in killing the passions and breaking habitual patterns of thought is willpower. But rather than conceiving the will as a part of the very ego that must be transcended, Blavatsky thinks that it derives from the complex of higher energies filtered down to human consciousness from the Higher Self. So the will is considered to be a crucial force in any such struggle towards establishing a

⁵⁰ Ibid.

mystical mindset, and thus, not a manifestation of the lower energies and personal ego, but a form of higher spiritual power, improperly understood or channelled.

Recognising the probability that such a radical prescription would be a difficult proposition to persuasively entice the average person, Madame Blavatsky yet remains obstinate and unyielding. The “straight gate of occultism” is the only effective approach, and does not allow for exceptions. Worldly interests and priorities, no matter how morally justified yet cannot be confused with spiritual aspirations. So not only is familial love a distraction, it also is considered an obstacle and distraction from the more alluring priority of “real occultism.” Thus, Blavatsky unequivocally makes it clear that a dramatic reorientation of values and priorities must be in place prior to full engagement on the spiritual quest. Compromise dilutes energy and willpower, so there must come a firm choice of options. According to the strict interpretation applied by Blavatsky, selfishness and egotism are the dominant motives of the normal human mindset. So what is considered selfish and non-universal is felt to be antithetical to a broader form of compassion.

This is but natural, we shall be told. Quite so; in the light of the code of human affections; less so, in that of divine universal love. For, while the heart is full of thoughts for a little group of selves, near and dear to us, how shall the rest of mankind fare in our souls? What percentage of love and care will there remain to bestow on the “great orphan”? And how shall the “still small voice” make itself heard in a soul entirely occupied with its own privileged tenants? What room is there left for the needs of Humanity en bloc to impress themselves upon, or even receive a speedy response? And yet he who would profit by the wisdom of the universal mind, has to reach it through the whole of Humanity without distinction of race, complexion, religion or social status. It is altruism, not ego-ism even in its most legal and noble conception, that can lead the unit to merge its little Self in the Universal Selves. It is to these needs and to this work that the true disciple of true Occultism has to devote himself, if he would obtain theo-sophy, divine Wisdom and Knowledge.⁵¹

“Divine universal love” is felt to be something incapable of demonstration by those who are only preoccupied with a “little group of selves.” The conventional “code of human affections” may suggest a valuation of the selfish above the universal, but this orientation must be reversed if authentic mystical enlightenment is to be achieved. It appears that Blavatsky thinks that a choice must be made between mutually exclusive

options. If people are only concerned with their own private interests, then “Humanity en bloc” will be ignored or unacknowledged. The universal altruism that is favoured makes no distinction of “race, complexion, religion or social status,” and is opposed to all forms of egocentric activity, regardless of how they may be esteemed by society at large. “The “true disciple of occultism” must remain dedicated to the acquisition of “theo-sophy” to productively embark upon true altruistic causes.

Madame Blavatsky allows no room for conciliation, suggesting a final choice that must reflect the true priorities of the individual. The continuity of the dualistic theme is now couched in practical terms, illustrated by scenarios that might result in ineffective and indecisive actions. The ultimate decision comes down to a choice of either serving “the body” or “the higher Soul.” Exclusive attention to one or the other will result in discontent and failure to thoroughly attend to all needs. And the pursuit of “true practical Occultism” is especially doomed to failure when efforts extend to practice rather than theory. The choice of either the altruistic impersonal “divine love of Humanity” or the self-interested forms of “terrestrial love” must be made decisively and finally. Attempting to juggle priorities will only produce ambivalent and unsatisfactory results in either direction if firm commitment is not given one way or the other.

Even worse, those that once made a commitment to pursue occultism for noble reasons, but succumb to selfishness and lust later face an even more damaging and disastrous karmic fate.

Worse than this. For, whoever indulges after having pledged himself to OCCULTISM in the gratification of a terrestrial love or lust, must feel an almost immediate result; that of being irresistibly dragged from the impersonal divine state down to the lower plane of matter. Sensual, or even mental self-gratification, involves the immediate loss of the powers of spiritual discernment; the voice of the MASTER can no longer be distinguished from that of one's passions or even that of a Dugpa; the right from wrong; sound morality from mere casuistry... And once being mistaken and having acted on their mistakes, most men shrink from realizing their error, and thus descend deeper and deeper into the mire. And, although it is the intention that decides primarily whether white or black magic is exercised, yet the results even of involuntary, unconscious sorcery cannot fail to be productive of bad Karma.⁵²

The breaking of the pledge to occultism is shown as a dramatic and immediate qualitative

⁵¹ Ibid.

change for the worse. The image of a descent from the lofty heights of the “impersonal divine state” to the “lower plane of matter” indicates that only absolutely dedicated individuals may hazard the risks. And when “sensual or even mental self-gratification” prevails, all sense of balance and order is dissipated. A confused and chaotic mental state ensues in which moral standards no longer stand clearly self-evident. And even the hint of potential psychosis is indicated when she mentions that there will be difficulty distinguishing the source of subjective impressions. Any progress with enhanced supersensory power and spiritual consciousness is also stated to be susceptible to immediate retardation and dissipation.

Blavatsky takes the position that once the “mistakes” are made, most individuals would rather remain in a state of denial and thus avoid dealing with the responsibilities of their actions, and so they “descend deeper and deeper into the mire.” And even though it is the intention that defines whether black or white magic is being exercised, even “involuntary, unconscious sorcery cannot fail to be productive of bad Karma.” Thus, the repercussions will be long lasting and complex. This leads to Blavatsky’s concluding observations on the possible negative ramifications of taking the wrong path towards occultism. Sorcery is an act of evil causing suffering for others. This produces greater and greater karmic debts, which will require lifetimes for fair retribution to be meted out. Better to avoid the initial entanglements and the heavy long-term cost. The most exalted spiritual role models are those who have dedicated themselves to the betterment of mankind while killing the influences of the personality. Here, the precautionary warning is extolled, reminding that “selfish motives” can lead to danger. The majority of individuals who are still in the process of reincarnating and dealing with their karmic debts must proceed carefully. Only the commitment to Atma-Vidya will prevent reckless indulgence in irresponsible occult practices

As well, it is not solely the actions of individuals that may be blamed for disastrous consequences, but the baleful influence of the current cosmic cycle also must be factored into the equation.

We are in the Kali Yuga and its fatal influence is a thousand-fold more powerful in the West than it is in the East; hence the easy preys made by the Powers of the Age of Darkness in this cyclic struggle, and the many delusions under which the

⁵² Ibid.

world is now labouring. One of these is the relative facility with which men fancy they can get at the "Gate" and cross the threshold of Occultism without any great sacrifice. It is the dream of most Theosophists, one inspired by desire for Power and personal selfishness, and it is not such feelings that can ever lead them to the coveted goal.⁵³

Blavatsky here seems to indicate a cosmic struggle on more elevated planes of existence between forces of good and evil. The "Powers of the Age of Darkness" are the antithesis of the compassionate Masters of Wisdom. One of the influences of these agents of Darkness is in fostering the illusion that it is relatively easy to succeed in occult objectives without personal sacrifice or cost. And being blunt, Blavatsky accuses a majority of theosophists of being motivated by greed, power, and ambition. And the note of cynicism warns that the desired end simply cannot be achieved in such a way. Not shying away from expressing her candid opinions, Blavatsky ends the article with an admonition about the dangers of believing that there is an easy and effortless means of achieving supersensory and exalted states of consciousness.

...at the bare mention of some of the preliminary difficulties the affrighted Western candidates turn back and retreat with a shudder ... Let them stop here and attempt no more in their great weakness. For if, while turning their backs on the narrow gate, they are dragged by their desire for the Occult one step in the direction of the broad and more inviting Gates of that golden mystery which glitters in the light of illusion, woe to them! It can lead only to Dugpa-ship, and they will be sure to find themselves very soon landed on that Via Fatale of the Inferno...⁵⁴

The "narrow gate" is unequivocally presented as the only legitimate path to true occult knowledge and spiritual experience. Madame Blavatsky gets to the heart of the matter as she sees it. The inexperienced and naïve Westerner is prone to "great weakness." And though refusing to follow the necessary disciplines and make the appropriate sacrifices and change in lifestyle, they are still fascinated and lured by the occult. They may find other organisations and teachers. However, these ultimately are based on "illusion," that can only lead to the abhorred "Dugpa-ship" and inevitable descent to the psychological equivalent of Dante's Inferno.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

5.9 The Influence of Blavatsky's View of Supersensory Experience on Theosophy

This representative view by Blavatsky about the requisite conditions necessary for authentic psychic and spiritual growth stamped the theosophical attitude towards such pursuits. And though the somewhat harsh and unbending stance was modified and simplified to some degree by later exponents, the basic framework of a moral justification has largely remained. In theosophical thought, pursuit of “powers” (siddhis) for their own sake is discouraged. A wider more comprehensive spiritual philosophy and recognition of moral consequences have usually been presented in conjunction with such occult priorities. And the possibility of deviating from a morally sanctioned framework of disciplined, selfless, incremental progress towards pursuit of powers for themselves has often been interpreted as a descent towards “black magic” or superficial occultism. These comments illustrate this point.

It will tend to correct many errors which I see already springing up through misdirected notions of theosophists who are leaning and longing after psychic culture. For I know a good many persons who are hankering after what they call “knowledge and light” but which in reality is a desire to find occult powers that they are willing to hunt all through the Theosophical Society, but are not willing to put the society publicly on its true philosophical and moral basis...⁵⁵

It is the peril of Black Magic against which the student of occultism is guarded by the law which forbids him to use his occult powers for himself; for though no man is a Black Magician who does not deliberately exert his personal Will against the great Law it is well to recognize the essence of Black Magic and to check the very beginning of evil...⁵⁶

Unfortunately, as is always the case in an age which has lost touch with spirituality, people yearn for powers, for the development of suspected but scarcely accepted higher faculties: and in their blindness they search outside of themselves. These hearts are hungry for answers to the enigmas of life, and so they take what they can from self-advertised teachers about how to gain and use psychical powers ...⁵⁷

The following words sum up the theosophical state of affairs in regards to the

⁵⁵ William Q. Judge, *Practical Occultism*, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1980, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Annie Besant, *A Study in Consciousness*, Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1959, p. 343.

⁵⁷ G. de Purucker, *Fountain Source of Occultism*, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1974, p. 9.

prevalent attitude towards the pursuit, acquisition, and utilisation of extended supersensory powers.

Modern theosophists certainly taught that it was possible to acquire knowledge in an unusual way, but they did not value especially the acquisition of such knowledge except perhaps as an indirect result of “spirituality” rather than “psychism.” As a consequence, only a small group of specially “initiated” theosophists and members who were far advanced in occultism claimed to possess this knowledge and some of these made communications on the basis of detailed and trained visionary experiences.⁵⁸

While the moral distinction between right and wrong occultism was preached in the theosophical movement from Blavatsky onwards, and “spirituality” was always prioritised over “psychism,” The attentiveness to, and pursuit of, supersensory skills was an important element of the system of thought. The types of unusual experiences that Blavatsky was subject to established her own justifiable framework of belief and grounds for claiming personal expertise. Other notable personages of the theosophical movement, the “small group of specially initiated theosophists and members,” likewise claimed personal legitimation in so far as their own private psychic experiences were concerned. Thus, Judge, Olcott, Besant, Leadbeater, Kingsford, Bailey, Steiner, Arundale, and other leaders of the broad theosophical movement of that period all claimed first-hand fluency in psychic and spiritual activities.

With Madame Blavatsky utilising her own subjective experiential materials as a criterion of authority, the articulation via a rather conventional mainstream morality resulted in a system of ideas in which esoteric premises were presented as either “good” or “bad” according to the stance of the individual student/practitioner. The dualistic option meant that those adhering to the philosophy that the “animal side of man” must be unequivocally destroyed and mastered were considered the ideal candidates for proper expansion of consciousness. And those who opted for the “selfish” priorities were told they were potentially on the verge of disaster. Yet, despite this distinction, the legitimacy of altered states of consciousness and enhanced dimensions of experience were presumed to be undeniable facts. By using her own experiential expertise and fluency in such matters, Madame Blavatsky legitimised the belief that man’s capacity to partake in such

⁵⁸ J.J. Poortman, *Vehicles of Consciousness*, Volume Two, Utrecht/Adyar/London/Wheaton: The Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, 1978, p. 182.

experiences was actual, though mostly dormant. And, together with a revised interpretation of the three main categories of knowledge, the inclusion of a belief in supersensory and mystical states of consciousness helped solidify the unique elements of the theosophical ideational structure. Distinctive presentations of the nature of knowledge and the boundaries of experience were essential components of this edifice.

Another crucial element was the establishment of a source of supreme authority by which the basic worldview was given transcendent legitimation. Because the theosophical worldview was essentially based on mystical values, purely secular criteria could only carry the case for plausibility so far. Rational discourse using empirical data and logical argumentation could bring the system only so much reputability. But since the Masters or Mahatmas were presented as the sponsors of Blavatsky and personally involved with the Theosophical Society, their credibility would have to be based on more than human standards. However, the topic of the Masters is multifaceted and bears upon a number of issues in theosophical history. We will now try and examine how the Masters impacted on the theosophical movement.