

Evolution and *The Secret Doctrine*

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In recent years with the advent of the so-called “scientific creationism”, the old debate over Darwin’s theory of evolution has begun once more. The “scientific creationists” attempt to prove, on empirical grounds, that the Biblical description of creation given in Genesis is a viable alternative to the theory of evolution.¹ This idea, naturally enough, is repudiated by the advocates of evolution who regard such a challenge as little short of blasphemy.² Other, more moderate viewpoints have also been put forth which, while accepting the general idea of evolution, seek to interpret and explain it in a variety of novel ways.^{3,4,5} Theosophical teachings on the subject occupy a sort of no man’s land apart from either the orthodox scientific or the fundamentalist Biblical points of view. Since many Theosophists seem to be unclear as to exactly what *The Secret Doctrine* says about biological evolution, it seems worthwhile to review these ideas in the light of contemporary ideas on the subject.

Contemporary science has identified the possession of a genetic program as the primary characteristic which distinguishes “living” organisms from the rest of the world. This genetic code is carried by the unique molecule known as deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). DNA carries the instructions for both its own self-replication and for the synthesis of protein within the cell. Since many of them act as enzymes or organic catalysts, the proteins synthesized under the direction of DNA are responsible for the control of the biochemical machinery of the organism. Every organism has a unique set of genetic instructions which is shared by every one of its constituent cells. Organisms can be classified on the basis of their genetic content. Those organisms whose genetic material is sufficiently similar for breeding to occur are classified within the same species. Species in turn are closely or distantly related to one another on the basis of the similarity of their genetic patterns. The way in which the amazing variety of species has come into being is the primary concern of evolutionary science. Charles Darwin, in his *Origin of Species*⁶ proposed a solution to this mystery which is still the explanation accepted, in substance, by the vast majority of scientists today. While modern scientists have added to and updated Darwin’s theory in the light of increased knowledge, such as the Mendelian theory of genetics, and while there is still considerable debate over details, the basic idea that evolution has occurred and that the mechanism proposed by Darwin has played an important role in that process remains without serious challenge.

The “synthetic” theory of evolution, which combines Darwin’s ideas with those of modern genetics⁷, is based upon two fundamental processes: variation and natural selection. Through genetic variation, which is believed to occur spontaneously and randomly, organisms arise with characteristics different from their parents. This variation does not in and of itself result in evolution. Rather, it provides the raw material required for the operation of the second process, natural selection. Natural selection may be defined as the “differential reproductive success of favoured variats”⁸. It is the process which sorts out those organisms whose characteristics are favourable for their survival within the prevalent environment. The “selected” organisms leave more offspring and therefore the genes for their particular traits increase in frequency within the species. New species arise when a small population branches off from its parent stock and diverges genetically to the point that it is incapable of breeding with its parent population. This usually occurs when a population becomes geographically or otherwise isolated from its parent population.

Evolution therefore occurs at three levels. This has been summarized in the following way: genes mutate, individuals are selected, and species evolve. Genetic variation provides the raw material for evolution. Natural selection allows favoured individuals to survive and reproduce, altering the genetic pool of future generations. Individuals collectively form species which give rise to new species when enough genetic variation has occurred within an isolated population. In addition to the Darwinian mechanism of natural selection, it is now realized that there are other factors which are at least in part, responsible for evolution.⁹ Basically these involve what has been called “random change”, a term which refers to a shift in gene frequency occurring as a statistical effect apart from natural selection.

The picture of evolution outlined in H.P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* does not deny any of the principles which have been described above but it does deny that these principles are sufficient in themselves to account for the panorama of life which we behold around us. They are, it teaches, secondary effects which come into play once life has entered the region of physical causation. According to *The Secret Doctrine* the process of evolution begins in regions which are inaccessible to physical science as it now exists. These uncharted regions, which H.P.B. calls the “astral”, are worlds of superphysical reality which are said to interpenetrate and inform our material world. No proof is given for this assumption and therefore the scientist can hardly be blamed for maintaining an attitude of scepticism. Nevertheless, *The Secret Doctrine* maintains that the astral world is no less real than the world of the five senses and that it in fact underlies that world. Evolution began in this astral world which contained at the beginning of the present “Round” or cycle of evolution, the ancestral “prototypes” or “patterns” left over from the previous Round. In the course of time, these “prototypes” materialized into physical expression. As materialization occurred, the astral forms became the invisible moulds around which physical organisms were organized from the surrounding elements, like iron filings arranging themselves in a magnetic field. Man's body, according to this teaching, originated as an astral pattern, as did the organisms of the first animals, plants and micro-organisms. The “lower” life-forms materialized first, followed by the rest in ascending order. As life entered the arena of material causation, the biochemical processes with which we are familiar today were called into action and with them, the possibility for genetic variation and natural selection along Darwinian lines. From this point, life diverged in many directions from the handful of original “types” to the million or so species found in the world today. H.P.B. describes this in the following way:

The truth is that the differentiating “causes known to modern science only come into operation after the physicalization of the primeval animal root-types out of the astral. Darwinism only meets Evolution at its midway point – that is to say when astral evolution has given place to the play of the ordinary physical forces with which our present senses acquaint us.¹⁰

The Secret Doctrine agrees with accepted ideas of evolution with respect to the evolutionary history of certain classes of organisms and disagrees with them with respect to others. Thus H.P.B. had no quarrel with the evolution of certain species of fish into amphibians and of certain species of reptiles into birds. In the words of the Stanzas of Dzyan “They that creep on the ground got wings. They of the long necks in the water became the progenitors of the fowls of the air”.¹¹ On the other hand, when it comes to the evolution of the mammals, *The Secret Doctrine* rejects their evolution from reptiles and traces them back to an altogether different “astral pattern” – to the human pattern in fact. Man, it is taught, began as a gigantic astral phantom which over millions of years, gradually materialized to become the organism we recognize as man today. The early human races reproduced by “division”, almost as the microscopic amoeba does today. Later, they exuded “buds” from

themselves which developed into new human organisms. Just as occasional “monsters” are produced in childbirth even today, some of the “buds” developed not into human beings but into other kinds of creatures which then, reproducing, gave rise to whole new species on their own pathways of evolution. This was the origin of all the various mammalian species according to *The Secret Doctrine*. While modern science shows man descending from an animal ancestry, the theory set forth in *The Secret Doctrine* traces all the mammalian species back to forms shed by man himself. Sexual reproduction was, according to this theory, inaugurated only upon the full materialization of the astral types. The apes, it is said, arose from the breeding of some of the early men with some of the early mammals which were as yet, close enough to the original population to permit such interbreeding. Technically, there were two episodes of such interbreeding, and the present apes arose from the second admixture in which men breed with the descendents of the first.

Whatever we may make of these ideas, they are certainly at variance with the accepted notions of modern science just as they were at variance with the science of H.P.B.’s time. That H.P.B. was painfully aware of this discrepancy is indicated by her frequent apology for the strangeness of the ideas presented. “To speak of a race nine yatis high, or 27 feet” she wrote, “in a work claiming a more scientific character than ‘Jack the Giant-Killer’ is a somewhat unusual proceeding”.¹² And so it is. If, as many critics have suggested, H.P.B. invented the whole system of cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis contained in *The Secret Doctrine*, it is difficult to understand why she did not dream up something simpler and something which would have been more acceptable in the intellectual climate of her day. Indeed, it may be argued that the very preposterousness (the word is H.P.B.’s¹³) of some of the ideas presented is one of the best arguments for their authenticity.

There is, in addition to the discrepancies already discussed, an even more fundamental difference in *The Secret Doctrine* approach to evolution and that which is postulated by the majority of modern biologists. This is the idea of the evolution of consciousness which, H.P.B. taught, is the underlying drive behind the external evolution of astral and physical forms. According to *The Secret Doctrine* there is a universal consciousness or intelligence which is the ensouling power behind the unfolding panorama of life. This “Monadic Essence” moves circuitously yet progressively through the kingdoms of nature – from the elemental forces, through the minerals, plants and animals till finally it reaches the human stage where it awakens as a self-conscious, individual “soul”. Genetic variation arises not through chance but by the inner directive of the Monadic Essence seeking to express itself through more suitable forms. This is an idea which seems more akin to Lamarck’s belief (now widely repudiated) that life –form’s make creative and hereditary responses to perceived needs than to the Darwinian idea of variation and natural selection. At any rate, H.P.B. summarizes the esoteric teaching as follows:

Whence came the “useful variations” which develop the eye? Only from “blind forces.....without aim, without design?” The argument is puerile. The true solution of the mystery is to be found in the impersonal Divine Wisdom, in its IDEATION – reflected through matter.¹⁴

The story of evolution, as it is understood from the orthodox scientific point of view, does not include the element of teleology. It is all based on chance and fortuitous circumstances. There is no such thing as a “great chain of being” in which progressive evolution develops more and more complex forms in an effort to attain some goal. The teachings enunciated in *The Secret Doctrine* on

the other hand, maintain that evolution *is* progressive and that it is directed by Cosmic Mind. H.B.P. writes:

The whole order of nature evinces a progressive march toward a higher life. There is design in the action of the seemingly blindest forces. The whole process of evolution with its endless adaptations is proof of this. The immutable laws that weed out the weak and feeble species, to make room for the strong, and which insure the “survival of the fittest”, though so cruel in their immediate action – all are working toward the grand end. The very fact that adaptations *do* occur, that the fittest *do* survive in the struggle for existence, shows that what is called “unconscious Nature” is in reality an aggregate of forces manipulated by semi-intelligent beings (Elementals) guided by High Planetary Spirits (Dhyan Chohans) whose collective aggregate forms the manifested verbum of the unmanifested LOGOS, and constitutes at one and the same time the MIND of the Universe and its immutable LAW.

Once again it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to *prove* these assertions by means acceptable to the physical scientist. Such nevertheless, is the teaching of the Esoteric Philosophy.

The difference between the theory of evolution proposed in *The Secret Doctrine* and that proposed by modern biology is fundamental. Both theories take it for granted that evolution – in one form or the other – has occurred. Both theories take it for granted that evolution is for the most part, a gradual process which has taken place over millions of years, although the time scales differ considerably in some respects. The fundamental discrepancy is much more fundamental and has to do with the completely different worldviews of the modern scientist and the esotericist. The former seeks to explain the entire world in terms of the three or four fundamental forces which are known and understood, to some degree at least, at the present time. These include the electromagnetic force, the weak nuclear force (these two are now believed to be aspects of a single force or interaction), the strong nuclear force, and the force of gravity. Aside from these forces, modern science recognizes no others as, so far, there has not been a convincing demonstration, under laboratory conditions, that any other forces exist. Occult science, on the other hand, postulates a variety of forces unknown to modern science and a variety of states of “matter” beyond the reach of physical instrumentation. Such forces can be understood, demonstrated, and utilized no less than the forces known to physical science, but only by those willing to undergo the necessary training to acquire such mastery. As this is possible only by initiation into the Arcane Fraternities possessing such knowledge, this rules out the majority of scientists. Moreover, occultism maintains that the universe is the embodiment of life and consciousness, an idea which has been expressed by a minority of rather unorthodox physicists but which has as yet made very little impact upon biologists.

Whether the esoteric teachings on evolution will receive support from scientific evidence is an open question. That H.P.B. believed that such support was forthcoming is evident from her writings although at least one of her prophecies has seemingly failed to materialize;¹⁶

If the skeletons of man should, at any time, be discovered in the Eocene strata, but no fossil ape, thereby proving the existence of man prior to the anthropoid – then Darwinians will have to exercise their ingenuity in another direction. And it is said in well-informed quarters that the XXth century will be yet in its earliest teens, when such undeniable proof of Man’s priority will be forthcoming.

Unfortunately it has not done so. At any rate, the rather impressive confirmation of many of the ideas put forth in *The Secret Doctrine* with respect to other scientific questions¹⁷ leaves open the possibility of such developments. Concerning this possibility, H.P.B. left us with the following light-hearted remark:

It is just as possible that future should have in store for us the discovery of the giant skeleton of an Atlantean, 30 ft. high, as the fossil of a pithecoïd “missing link”: only the former is more probable.¹⁸

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