

# EVOLUTION & CREATION:

## A Theosophic Synthesis

By W. T. S. Thackara

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## Foreword

[*Evolution & Creation* was originally published in 2003 as a three-part series of articles in *Sunrise* magazine, reproduced here in a slightly revised version. Issued 1951–2007 "for better understanding among all peoples," *Sunrise* offers theosophical perspectives on a wide range of religious, philosophical, and scientific themes and their application to daily living. Back issues are available online. For those who are new to theosophical thought or to *Sunrise*, the following comments by founding editor James A. Long (1898-1971) may be helpful, and are as applicable today as when they were written nearly fifty years ago. — W.T.S.T.]

*Sunrise* came into being, not for the purpose of "selling" an idea or body of ideas, but with the sincere hope that those who search might find a thoughtful medium of exchange whereby together we could explore those basic durable concepts that have been the spiritual bulwark of the ages. After all, civilizations grow and become strong and great as the result of an expanding consciousness; by the same token civilizations fall and go into decay as the result of a contracting consciousness. It is openmindedness, whatever the faith or philosophy, whatever the creed or no creed, that will insure mankind's spiritual health.

Over the years we have discussed several themes common to most sacred scriptures. Some may ask just what is the value of a knowledge of all these things? Do they help us to live better; more importantly, do they bring strength and vision to meet the pressures of a complex age? We shall miss the boat completely if we allow ourselves to become involved solely in the intellectual fascination that certain aspects of these ancient traditions have, for that is not their purpose. These sacred scriptures were not preserved for posterity simply to tickle our intellectual palates. They have been given out periodically, from age to age, because behind every aspect of universal workings there is an ethical concept that we must not only recognize, but exemplify in our day-to-day lives.

All of which points up the tragedy that for many centuries we have not sought the broad view, not alone of the structure of the universe, but more pointedly of mankind's unique yet natural place within a larger pattern of destiny. We have been wont to consider, by miseducation, that we are worms of the dust and not potential gods. We have not been taught of the natural cooperation that exists in all the kingdoms above and below the

human, and that the human kingdom must rediscover the ways and means to become, in time, a self-conscious cooperator with nature. In simple words, we have not been educated to understand and to work with the fact that brotherhood is nature in action, and nature is brotherhood. Once the peoples of the world eliminate the separatism that would tear humanity asunder, and really work with the fact of brotherhood, we shall find that the time need not be far distant when we can foresee a workable peace and concord among the different but not separate peoples of the globe.

The framework of the ancient traditions comprises the most profound philosophy as well as the purest ethics. At the heart of all is divinity — within, without, above, below. That divinity seeks expression that it might enrich the environment into which its influence is born. In the long pattern of evolution, there is one law or habit of nature that is constant — the law of action and reaction, of cause and effect. In observing the working of this law, we intuit "a divinity that shapes our ends," and realize then how the experiences we meet from day to day and from year to year are signposts of what the soul requires for its growth. We have only to look into the "inverted bowl of night," as Omar Khayyam called it, to see the harmony there, and to recognize that each one of us has not only the potential but the sublime duty to become a conscious laborer in the field of human enlightenment. — JAMES A. LONG

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## Chapter 1

### Intelligent Design?

Behind and underlying any discussion of evolution and creation is a question that takes us to philosophy's very heart: Why is there a universe at all? Certainly our answers both reflect and define the meaning and direction of our lives; and they are important because our beliefs affect the lives of others as well — profoundly so. Creation and evolution are fundamentally about our origins and ancestry, and about who we are and where we're going. Although many people see no basic incompatibility, creation and evolution have come to represent two antagonistic, mutually exclusive worldviews, largely because of restrictive definitions, either/or reasoning, and tacitly-held assumptions. *Evolution* is generally equated with Darwinism, *creation* with biblical creationism; one is physics, the other metaphysics, and never the twain should meet. This thinking has become so habitual that we may not realize how much it narrows our perception and understanding; nor does rejection of one imply adoption of the other. As mathematician and Darwin critic David Berlinski wrote, "It is not necessary to choose between doctrines. The rational alternative to Darwin's theory is intelligent uncertainty" ("The Deniable Darwin," Letters, 1996).

Other reasonable alternatives also exist, reminding us of Allan Bloom's perceptive remark in *The Closing of the American Mind*: "The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities, that makes it seem inconceivable that other ways are viable." Modern media, public education, and the internet have massively diminished the power of the old tyrannies; but challenges to reigning orthodoxies will always remain unwelcome. Such is true of the new intelligent design movement which makes a persuasive case against Darwinian explanations of how we came to be. Because it has originated with competent, well-credentialed scientists, many critics — wary of theological intrusions — label it "stealth creationism," and what could be a mutually beneficial collaboration has once again become adversarial.

While the concept of intelligent design is nothing new — it is found in ancient philosophy\* and virtually every spiritual tradition — modern writers often point to British clergyman William Paley, who in 1802 gave impressive intellectual force to the argument. Just as we infer from the complexity of a watch found in the forest that it was designed and fabricated by an intelligent someone who had a clear purpose in mind, so may we likewise infer design and purpose from many examples of complex structure and function in nature. Design implies an intelligent designer, Paley argued, and since no animal or man can design itself, which would mean acting before existing, who then could the universal designer be but God? (*Natural Theology*, p. 412). This remains a compelling argument for many; but because Paley burdened it with questionable theological assumptions and some poor examples from nature, the argument was criticized and eventually fell out of favor. For example, if God is proven good by the beneficial nature of his contrivances, it is reasonable to ask why imperfections and "suboptimal designs" exist in nature. Why create a world which produces disease, deformity, and death in a ferociously competitive struggle for life?†

\*See "Plato on Intelligent Design," *Sunrise*, October/November 2005.

†It was precisely these issues that drove Darwin to agnosticism: "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae [parasitic wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars" (Letter to Asa Gray, May 22, 1860; in *The Life & Letters of Charles Darwin*, Volume 2, Appleton, New York, 1891, p. 105).

Any theory or hypothesis proposing intelligent design needs to address these questions, even if it must jettison dearly-held assumptions about the designer and the process by which things are made. But we need not reject the inference or concept of design because of faulty arguments. The same applies to evolution, which perhaps more than anything else has demonstrated kinship and unity-of-life relationships absent in notions of special creation, in which each kind or species is brought into being by a separate mystical act of God's will.

The concept of evolution — which simply means "unrolling" in the sense of change and development through time — has also been part of mankind's intellectual heritage since the beginning of recorded history. It is the *mechanism* or *process* of how things come to be and how they change that is debated. Darwin himself recognized major difficulties in his theory that even today — despite protest, denial, and far too many unkind words — remain unexplained: fossil gaps, hybrid limits, complex organs, the mechanics of instinct and, perhaps the greatest mystery of all, how the "simplest" of self-reproducing cells came into being.\* Darwin didn't speculate publicly about the origin of life but, anticipating modern biochemistry, he wrote to his friend Joseph Hooker in 1871 that "some warm little pond" might have supplied the chemicals and environment necessary to provide a foothold.

\*Cf. "Difficulties on the Theory" and following chapters in his *Origin of Species*.

In its simplest formulation, the neo-Darwinian synthesis hypothesizes descent by modification: that natural selection acting on genetic changes (copying errors and sexual recombination) is sufficient to produce the diversity of creatures on earth. No guiding force or creative principle is required, no metaphysical intervention is necessary; and for many Darwinians there is no ultimate purpose or end to which evolution is directed. For them, evolution takes place fortuitously within the constraints of existing physical laws. Species descend and diversify from common ancestors, some survive for long periods, others fail in the struggle for life, and all will eventually be extinguished when the sun runs out of fuel and the universe "entropizes" into heat death or collapses in a big crunch. What modern evolutionary science tells us, according to Darwinian biologist William B. Provine, is that "there are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, and no free will for humans, either" (Stanford University debate, 1994).

It is mainly because of these bleak, soul-denying conclusions that so many people have objected to the Darwinian worldview. But a majority of scientists and educators are persuaded that it explains the development of life on earth, and many of them lobby powerfully to have it taught in public schools as a proven theory, to the exclusion not only of any other theory or hypothesis, but — to avoid giving hostages to the creationists — of any critical discussion at all.

Yet right from the beginning reputable scientists have criticized Darwin's theory. For example, in 1871 zoologist St. George Jackson Mivart questioned whether natural selection could account for the incipient stages of useful structures such as a wing — how, for example, does nature develop and select as reproductively advantageous a partial, nonfunctional wing? Stephen J. Gould in 1985 acknowledged this as remaining "the primary stumbling block among thoughtful and friendly scrutinizers of Darwinism today." In 1877 anthropologist Armand de Quatrefages, while praising Darwin for "a complete and systematic theory," said he "found no difficulty in recognising the point at which the eminent author quits the ground of reality and enters upon that of inadmissible hypothesis." Agreeing with Darwin that selection results from the struggle for existence (although he felt "elimination" to be a more exact term), de Quatrefages strongly

disagreed that these two factors have "the power of modifying organised beings indefinitely in a given direction, so that the direct descendants of one *species* form *another species* distinct from the first." Darwin, he wrote, had no clear idea of the difference between species and *varieties* within a species, and consequently confuses the preservative force of natural selection, which favors fit and healthy varieties, with the ability to produce new species. Citing hybrid limits, fossil discontinuities, and species stasis, de Quatrefages reiterated that "phenomena which *produce* are very different from those which *preserve*" (*The Human Species*, pp. 92-103).

This thought was echoed nearly a hundred years later by zoologist and former president of the French Academy of Sciences, Pierre-P. Grasse, who wrote in *Evolution of Living Organisms* (1973): "*To vary and to evolve are two different things; this can never be sufficiently emphasized.*" Even with the important extensions to the theory provided by modern genetics and biochemistry, Grasse held that

the explanatory doctrines of biological evolution do not stand up to an objective, in-depth criticism. They prove to be either in conflict with reality or else incapable of solving the major problems involved. . . .

Through the use and abuse of hidden postulates, of bold, often ill-founded extrapolations, a pseudoscience has been created. It is taking root in the very heart of biology and is leading astray many biochemists and biologists, who sincerely believe that the accuracy of fundamental concepts has been demonstrated, which is not the case. . . .

The code of conduct that the naturalist wishing to understand the problem of evolution must adopt is to adhere to facts and sweep away all *a priori* ideas and dogmas. Facts must come first and theories must follow. . . . Indeed, the best studies on evolution have been carried out by biologists who are not blinded by doctrines and who observe facts coldly without considering whether they agree or disagree with their theories. Today, our duty is to destroy the myth of evolution, considered as a simple, understood, and explained phenomenon which keeps rapidly unfolding before us. Biologists must be encouraged to think about the weaknesses of the interpretations and extrapolations that theoreticians put forward or lay down as established truths. The deceit is sometimes unconscious, but not always, since some people, owing to their sectarianism, purposely overlook reality and refuse to acknowledge the inadequacies and the falsity of their beliefs. — pp. 202, 6, 8

This forceful critique summarized a swelling wave of discontent from others in a variety of disciplines, including paleontology, biochemistry, mathematics, and physics. The absence of finely-graded transitional fossils ultimately led Stephen Gould to dismiss textbook Darwinism as "effectively dead," and to propose with Niles Eldredge in 1972 the theory of Punctuated Equilibrium which postulates speciation from rapid change in remote sheltered environments, followed by long periods of stasis. In 1985 biologist Michael J. Denton issued *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, which reviews the principal scientific criticisms of Darwinian theory, driving home the point that complex interacting structures and systems cannot arise from mutation and selection alone. A year later, chemistry professor Robert Shapiro published *Origins*, a skeptical critique of soup-to-cell and other theories of biogenesis, showing the enormous gap between precursor chemistry and the micro-universe of even the simplest self-replicating cell. In the early 1990s, law professor Phillip E. Johnson, like attorney Norman Macbeth before him (*Darwin Retried*, 1971), subjected Darwinian theory to rules of evidence and logic in his book *Darwin on Trial*, only to reinforce the scientific criticisms.

After sorting through the arguments and rebuttals, perhaps the most persistent problem for Darwinian theory, and the one most resistant to purely physical explanations, is the appearance of design in nature. Grasse had also reached the same conclusion:

Evolution, a guided phenomenon, is not sustained merely by random hereditary variations, sorted out by a selection operating for the good of a population. . . .

*Any system that purports to account for evolution must invoke a mechanism not mutational and aleatory [random]. . . . The united efforts of paleontology and molecular biology, the latter*

stripped of its dogmas, should lead to the discovery of the exact mechanism of evolution, possibly without revealing to us the causes of the orientations of lineages, of the finalities of structures, of living functions, and of cycles. Perhaps in this area biology can go no farther: the rest is metaphysics. — pp. 245-6

At the macro level, physicist Paul Davies affirmed a similar thought in *Cosmic Blueprint* (1988):

The very fact that the universe *is* creative, and that the laws have permitted complex structures to emerge and develop to the point of consciousness — in other words, that the universe has organized its own self-awareness — is for me powerful evidence that there is "something going on" behind it all. The impression of design is overwhelming. — p. 203

Two years after the publication of Denton's book, biochemist Michael Behe read it and came away thinking that he, like so many other professionals, had been beguiled by Darwinian theory — and "beguiling," said Steven Gould, "is often forever." Behe, too, had not questioned or examined the theory's premises, assumptions, and explanatory power. He went on to consider evolutionary problems in his own field, and began to realize that biological structures such as the bacterial flagellum — the rotating, tail-like whip which propels the cell — were in fact molecular machines requiring many different but integrated molecules to work. If an essential part is missing from the structure, function ceases — leading Behe to conclude that many of these molecular systems are "irreducibly complex" and defy not only a Darwinian interpretation, but any theory which does not invoke intelligent design. In *Darwin's Black Box* (1996), Behe does not propose a mechanism of design or speculate on the nature and motives of the implied but unknown designer. He simply and effectively illustrates nature's staggering complexity with several detailed examples at the biochemical level — molecular synthesis, cilia construction and function, blood-clotting cascades, the chemistry of vision, cellular protein transport — and asks if it is still reasonable to conclude that these evolved fortuitously under principles of unguided gradualistic change: "The scientific obstacles discussed [here] serve as stark examples of the mountains and chasms that block a Darwinian explanation" (p. 161).\*

\*Behe's chapter on molecular synthesis — which is *not* an irreducibly complex process — indicates the problem at the most basic level of biochemistry. The relatively "simple" molecule AMP is an unbound form of adenine, one of the four nucleotide building blocks or links in RNA and DNA chains. AMP is assembled from thirty-three atoms of five different kinds: hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and phosphorus. As most atoms do not lie about freely like parts awaiting assembly, these components must first be extracted from other molecules, and then reassembled in such a way that cross-reactions do not destroy the process. Thirteen sequentially-orchestrated steps are required to accomplish the synthesis of AMP, the work of which is carried out by twelve different enzymes — each of which also needs to be synthesized in order to catalyze the changes. To put this in perspective, a cellular RNA macromolecule ranges from about 70 to 50,000 nucleotides in length while a single DNA macromolecule ranges from several thousand to about a billion nucleotides in length.

And they raise the daunting question, "How might these enormously-complex metabolic pathways and biochemical systems have evolved?" Even if natural selection can somehow work on variation at the molecular level — though Behe, "genetic drift" theorists, and others contest it as the primary cause of evolution — are any random-based theories sufficient to explain the emergence and diversity of self-sustaining life? Is it not just as reasonable to apply what mathematician William A. Dembski calls the "Design Inference" — that nature's structures exhibit a specifiable level of complexity from which intelligent design must be inferred?

Taken as a whole, these are powerful arguments and, in view of them, Darwinian theory begins to resemble Newtonian physics, which explains and predicts phenomena at one level, but fails when applied to others. Some evolutionary biologists such as Lynn Margulis have already written about Darwinism in much the same way historians do about Ptolemy's geocentric universe: while it may appear to explain a few evolutionary phenomena, it is fundamentally flawed. "Neo-Darwinism, in the Gaian perspective, must be intellectually dismissed as a minor, twentieth-century sect within the sprawling religious persuasion of Anglo-Saxon biology" (*Slanted Truths*, 1997, p. 281). Nevertheless, it remains today the overwhelmingly dominant

scientific paradigm.

A truly comprehensive theory of origins and ancestry requires a broader scope that includes not only biochemistry and biology, but also accounts for the origin and development of consciousness, its relation to force and substance, and the emergence of thinking, self-aware organisms such as you and me. In both physics and cosmology, the traditional boundaries separating science and religion (or physics and metaphysics) are rapidly thinning as observational data and mathematics force radical new theories. In little more than a hundred years, physics has had to expand from Newtonian principles describing and predicting such things as the motion of planets and baseballs, to relativistic quantum dynamics explaining particles and quarks; and from there to theories proposing a more fundamental substance called strings, themselves described as "abstract energetic fields" having the property of occupying at least six "compactified" dimensions hidden within our familiar four dimensions of space and time. And now there is M-theory (standing for Matrix, Mother, or Murky — depending on your perspective) which hopes to unify all the forces including gravity and dark energy (sometimes called "quintessence").

At the cosmic level, astronomer Edwin Hubble's 1929 discovery of galactic red shift (Hubble's Law) led to the development of big bang theory. Prompted by further observational data and the requirements of math and quantum physics, inflation theory was proposed as a modification by Alan Guth of MIT in the 1980s; and cosmologists are now seriously considering a number of "multiple universe" theories to explain the origin and development of our own cosmic home. According to Guth in a *New York Times* interview, "Inflation pretty much forces the idea of multiple universes upon us" (October 29, 2002). One interesting theory of cyclic universes was proposed in 2001 by astrophysicists Paul J. Steinhardt (Princeton) and Neil Turok (Cambridge). Based on M-theory, it postulates that

space and time exist forever. The big bang is not the beginning of time. Rather, it is a bridge to a pre-existing contracting era [mediated within an extra dimension of space]. The Universe undergoes an endless sequence of cycles in which it contracts in a big crunch and re-emerges in an expanding big bang, with trillions of years of evolution in between. The temperature and density of the universe do not become infinite at any point in the cycle; indeed, they never exceed a finite bound (about a trillion trillion degrees). . . . The seeds for galaxy formation were created by instabilities arising as the Universe was collapsing towards a big crunch, prior to our big bang. — "The Endless Universe," published by Doubleday in 2007.

Even though current "multiverse" scenarios purport to solve many theoretical problems of the big bang, especially the mystery of its source and cause, scientists remain divided on the issue of design: Can a physics-only cosmological explanation account for everything? Or must metaphysical factors be invoked — ranging from an anthropic guiding principle which somehow orients the universe to produce life and thinking, self-aware beings, to an elaborated theory of intelligent design? And so the research and dialogue continue.

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If the universe is designed, we may wonder who or what is the unknown designer? Leading design theorists, while generally limiting themselves to proofs of design and a designer, not the existence of God, nevertheless propose Christian theism as an "inference to the best explanation"— *theism* being the concept of God as the Supreme Being and creator of all things, who transcends yet remains immanent in the world.\* But is this the best explanation when it is beset by the intractable problems of imperfection, disparity, and injustice? As with Paley's *theological* argument, the evident failures and mistakes in nature raise the further question: Is the universe designed intelligently? Or was it done perhaps by a committee, or by many designers including architects and builders, as a kind of work-in-progress?

\**Science and Evidence for Design in the Universe*, Ignatius Press, 2000, pp. 15, 226-32.

Over twenty years before Paley's book, the argument from design as a proof of God was critically scrutinized in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by British empiricist and skeptical philosopher David Hume. Although Hume showed the insuperable difficulties raised by theistic concepts of an omnipotent and perfectly benevolent Deity, he nevertheless left the door open to some kind of design, resolved into "one simple,

though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*" (Part XII, 227 — Hume's emphasis). Even so, this does not warrant the inference of a single designer:

And what shadow of an argument . . . can you produce, from your hypothesis, to prove the unity of the Deity? A great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a commonwealth; why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world? (Part V, 167)

A multiple-designer theory is not as far-fetched as it may sound; not only has it been seriously proposed by a few in the intelligent design movement to explain imperfection, it is in fact a fundamental (though sometimes hidden) concept in both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, including the Judeo-Christian. The word "God" in the first line of *Genesis*, for example, is a translation of the singularized plural noun *elohim* which, consistent with its polytheistic origin as well as with universal tradition, represents a collectivity of creative powers — the plural of majesty interpretation notwithstanding. And God/*elohim* said on the sixth "day" or period of creative activity: "Let *us* create man in *our* own image, after *our* likeness" (see chapter 3 below). In Hindu writings, the story is overt: Brahma, the manifest aspect of Brahman, who in turn exists within Parabrahman ("That which is beyond Brahman"), creates and evolves the universe from his own consciousness-energy-substance with the assistance of his ten mind-born sons, to whom he said: "From now on, you must produce all the creatures, as well as the gods, demons, and human beings" (*Matsya Purana* 3:1-47).

The testimony of history and common sense tell us that the opening chapters of *Genesis*, and the creation stories of virtually every spiritual tradition, are intended to be understood allegorically. If we do not have the keys to their interpretation, it is perhaps because they have been hidden away, forgotten, suppressed, or held secret; or we have not looked for them. One place to begin that search — and a solution to the problem of design — is suggested in the following passage from *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877 when dominant Western thought held that atoms were indivisible, the Milky Way was the only universe, Christianity the only true religion, and God the only possible designer, who created everything out of nothing. Referring to the primordial tradition, the *theosophia* or divine wisdom common to all religions, H. P. Blavatsky wrote:

The esoteric doctrine, then, teaches, like Buddhism and Brahmanism, and even the persecuted [Jewish] *Kabala*, that the one infinite and unknown Essence exists from all eternity, and in regular and harmonious successions is either passive or active. In the poetical phraseology of Manu these conditions are called the "day" and the "night" of Brahma [each comprising 4.32 billion years]. The latter is either "awake" or "asleep." . . . The Buddhists maintain that there is *no* Creator but an infinitude of *creative powers*, which collectively form the one eternal substance, the *essence* of which is inscrutable — hence not a subject for speculation for any true philosopher. . . . Upon inaugurating an active period, says the *Secret Doctrine*, an expansion of this Divine essence, *from within outwardly*, occurs in obedience to eternal and immutable law, and the phenomenal or visible universe is the ultimate result of the long chain of cosmical forces thus progressively set in motion. In like manner, when the passive condition is resumed, a contraction of the Divine essence takes place, and the previous work of creation is gradually and progressively undone. The visible universe becomes disintegrated, its material dispersed; and "darkness," solitary and alone, broods once more over the face of the "deep." To use a metaphor which will convey the idea still more clearly, an outbreathing of the "unknown essence" produces the world; and an inhalation causes it to disappear. *This process has been going on from all eternity, and our present universe is but one of an infinite series which had no beginning and will have no end.* — 2:264-5

The convergence of modern cosmology with these ancient ideas, together with the inference of creative evolution, provide striking evidence that there have been those throughout history who, bridging the worlds of physics and metaphysics with extraordinary insight, appear to have understood the basic pattern of life. Like the inference of design, their existence may be intuited and inferred, for their philosophy is of record and tallies well with history and nature — a subject to be considered next, together with the neglected and often excluded issue of consciousness.

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## Chapter 2

### The "Excluded Middle"

Those faculties which enable us to transcend time and space, and to realize the wonderful conceptions of mathematics and philosophy, or which give us an intense yearning for abstract truth, . . . are evidently essential to the perfect development of man as a spiritual being, but are utterly inconceivable as having been produced through the action of a law [natural selection] which looks only, and can look only, to the immediate material welfare of the individual or the race.

The inference I would draw from this class of phenomena is, that a superior intelligence has guided the development of man in a definite direction, and for a special purpose, . . . we must therefore admit the possibility that, if we are not the highest intelligences in the universe, some higher intelligence may have directed the process by which the human race was developed, by means of more subtle agencies than we are acquainted with.

— Alfred Russel Wallace, "The Limits of Natural Selection"\*

\*In *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection*, London, 1870, pp. 358-9. Wallace is best known for independently proposing a theory of natural selection which spurred Charles Darwin to complete and publish his *Origin of Species* (1859). Their ideas were jointly presented at the Linnean Society on July 1, 1858.

In April 2001 National Public Radio aired a program billed as "Evolution vs. Intelligent Design" during which a telephone caller noted the either/or nature of the controversy. He observed that there seemed to be an "excluded middle here . . . excluded by a large majority of the people debating this." The phrase is apt, not only because evolution and intelligent design have been cast as mutually exclusive, but also because alternative viewpoints such as Wallace's have been marginalized or overlooked. In the public debate especially, fundamental concepts of evolution and creation are frequently redefined, miscategorized, and stereotyped in a way that — to repeat Allan Bloom's words — "makes it seem inconceivable that other ways are viable."

For example, in November 2002 the American Association for the Advancement of Science announced a resolution "urging policymakers to oppose teaching 'Intelligent Design Theory' within science classrooms, but rather, to keep it separate, in the same way that creationism and other religious teachings are currently handled." Two days later astronomer-physicist Lawrence Krauss, expressing a widely-held view in support, said that "intelligent design, by all objective standards, has nothing to do with science."\* The problem with this exclusionary point of view is that it sweeps aside a question that has everything to do with science. For the question "Is the universe designed?" is one about knowledge — *scientia* — not philosophy or religion, however closely related. When an archeologist deduces intelligent activity from potsherds and fire rings, and from that data infers something about their designers, he or she is engaged in a scientific pursuit. Unless we redefine science, it is no less scientific to seek knowledge about whether or not intelligence drives the universe. Setting all assumptions and preferences aside, this is one of the most important scientific questions we can ask because, like the question of existence, the way we answer it influences all of us profoundly.

\*National Public Radio, "Talk of the Nation/Science Friday," Nov. 8, 2002.

In chapter 1 we saw that both Darwinian theory and Christian theism pose intractable problems which only deepen the mystery of our origin and ancestry; and, moreover, that evolution and Darwinism are not equivalent terms, nor is intelligent design synonymous with creationism or incompatible with evolution. Yet these misleading stereotypes have been repeated so frequently that public discussion has for the most part been unable to step outside the box to consider evolution and creation from other scientific and religious perspectives.

Perhaps the most promising line of inquiry leading to broader insights is that of consciousness. It is partly because intelligent design implies a high order of consciousness that there has been renewed interest in the subject, though consciousness too poses fundamental research challenges. Owing to its inherently subjective



nature, consciousness does not yield easily to the usual protocols of science: when mind is inspecting itself, objective, testable, and predictably repeatable phenomena are notoriously difficult to observe and quantify. For that reason its study has heretofore been relegated to philosophy, religion, and the so-called "soft science" of psychology. However, in the last two decades a concerted effort to develop a science of consciousness has generated considerable research and discussion which has been reported extensively in academic conferences, symposia, articles, and books.\*

\*See for example the website of the University of Arizona's Center for Consciousness Studies, [www.consciousness.arizona.edu](http://www.consciousness.arizona.edu); also B. Alan Wallace, "The Intersubjective Worlds of Science and Religion," 2001 Templeton Research Lecture).

Despite this trend, tension and discord continue between "first person" experiential studies, such as those reported in contemplative and mystical traditions, and "third person" empirical research which is intrinsically object-based and favors physical, behavioral, and environmental explanations. And the old "hard problem" of causation remains: whether consciousness — human, animal, or other — is a temporal byproduct of electrochemistry, an illusion created by "neural correlates" which disintegrate at death; or something primary and architectural, capable of existing independently of organic physical forms, and therefore originating and reproducing itself from prior states of consciousness. Or perhaps both, in a kind of reciprocal causation.

As in the intelligent design debate, the study of consciousness is rife with conflicting theories, assumptions, and unproven hypotheses which, as some researchers caution, can blind us with the "illusion of knowledge" — a seemingly endless labyrinth of ambiguous data and purely intellectual argument where valuable research is frequently sacrificed to the minotaur of reductionism. Reducing subjective phenomena to chemistry and physics is common enough, but there is also the problem of selectively interpreting data and trying to fit it into concepts of the dominant paradigm — whether scientific or religious — often overlooking its larger significance.

Said in another way, the problem of knowledge is not essentially different from that faced by Socrates over 2,400 years ago when Meno posed the Sophist dilemma: In the search for knowledge, how is it possible to discover the object of your search if you do not know it? Even if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know? (*Meno* 80). This may strike us as pure sophistry (as Plato wished to illustrate), but it nevertheless highlights a limitation of scientific research, especially of human consciousness, which often perceives only what it wants or expects, as science historian Thomas S. Kuhn has effectively shown.\* We can wander to exhaustion in a maze of elusive phenomena filtered by our preconceptions, or instead, as Socrates might suggest, look for an Ariadne thread of intuition — the genius of scientific discovery — to show a way out.

\**The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., 1970, ch. 6, especially the Bruner and Postman study demonstrating the blinding effect of expectation, pp. 62-5.

Since 1871, when the distinguished chemist Sir William Crookes (following others before him) proposed the scientific investigation of psychic force, a number of reputable scientists have felt that psychic research offers one such path. If paranormal phenomena and survival of the individual after death could be proven under test conditions, then surely these would be evidence that consciousness can exist independently of the body. But when we consult the annals of history, this path too, while offering much to think over, has led to other labyrinths and minotaurs, such as blind credulity, psychic vanity, delusion, and fraud on the one hand, and extreme skepticism and derision on the other, pushing serious consideration of these phenomena to the periphery.

To avoid these pitfalls, we might broaden our scope and turn to another "excluded" path of inquiry that squarely addresses the nature of consciousness and its relationship with matter, blending physics and metaphysics in a way that offers coherent solutions to the problems of evolution and creation. In theosophical literature such as *The Secret Doctrine* and *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, as well as in older works, are several instances of scientific insight which suggest modes of consciousness not yet understood or recognized by today's science.\* Spiritual perception, intuition, enlightenment, and gnosis or knowledge of the Mysteries are routinely mentioned in the ancient wisdom traditions: from Gilgamesh who "saw secret things and opened

hidden places" to Socrates' philosopher who beheld "the beautiful, the just, and the good in their truth," and Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* who said: "Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden from you will become plain to you; for there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest."

\*See "Creation, Evolution, and the Secret Doctrine," *Sunrise*, April/May 1988, pp. 148-9. While making no claims to a comprehensive knowledge of the physical sciences, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) asserted the following ideas in contrast to then-prevailing theories: cyclically-evolving universes (1:16-17); the "infinite divisibility of the atom" (1:520); atoms are "light itself, crystallised and immetallised" (2:169); the sun is "glowing most undeniably, but not burning" (1:591); and subatomic forces that could "reduce to ashes 100,000 men" (1:562-3).

Theosophy literally means "divine wisdom" and its descriptions of cosmic and human evolution often begin with a number of prefaces. Although referring specifically to legislation but in a deeper sense to the divine law which calls forth and governs the universe, Plato calls them *proems*, adding that "it makes all the difference whether we clearly remember the preambles or not" (*Laws* 723); for these are meant to provide a necessary conceptual foundation to help orient us and clarify that which follows. H. P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, a modern presentation of the ancient wisdom-tradition, begins with three such preambles — the Preface, Introductory, and Proem. When asked how to read the book, she replied, "The first thing to do, even if it takes years, is to get some grasp of the 'Three Fundamental Principles' given in the Proem," followed by the recapitulation, that is, the numbered points in the Summing Up section (1:14-18, 269 et seq.).\*

\*See "The 'Secret Doctrine' and Its Study," in *An Invitation to The Secret Doctrine*, pp. 2-3.

A stepping stone to these three propositions from the standpoint of evolution is the *concept* of common ancestry: that all species on our planet derive from a common source and by implication are linked and rooted together in such a way that we may consider our earth as a living organism. While theosophy differs fundamentally from Darwinism in its description of that common ancestor, since it factors in consciousness and matter "not as independent realities but as the two facets or aspects of the Absolute," theosophy nevertheless shares with Darwinism the idea of the family relationship of all life. Yet it extends this concept to the very boundaries of our comprehension, affirming that the essential individuality of every being is an eternal union of consciousness and substance rooted in absolute Oneness, a monadic entity that endures from universe to universe in a continually evolving self-becoming — from within outward. "Replicating" itself through the cycling eternities, each such monadic entity clearly falls within a definition of life; and each of its manifested expressions — whether particle, plant, animal, human, or anything beyond — is therefore conscious on its own plane of perception, and is an essential living component of our living universe.

Appealing to "those faculties which enable us to transcend time and space, . . . which give us an intense yearning for abstract truth," the Three Fundamental Principles begin with the source of existence: an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable Principle, the "causeless cause and rootless root of all that was, is, or ever shall be." It or That (the nameless Reality) is not a being or an anthropomorphic, gendered god, but is described as an abstract "Be-ness" beyond the range and reach of human thought, unthinkable and unspeakable, *symbolized* by absolute abstract space and absolute abstract motion, the latter sometimes called the Great Breath:

Considering this metaphysical triad [the One Reality, Consciousness, and Matter] as the root from which proceeds all manifestation, the Great Breath assumes the character of precosmic Ideation. It is the *fons et origo* [source and origin] of force and of all individual consciousness, and supplies the guiding intelligence in the vast scheme of cosmic Evolution.

Just as pre-Cosmic Ideation is the root of all individual consciousness, so pre-Cosmic Substance is the substratum of matter in the various grades of its differentiation. . . .

Hence it will be apparent that the contrast of these two aspects of the Absolute is essential to the existence of the "Manifested Universe." — 1:15

Here *The Secret Doctrine* emphasizes that consciousness derives from prior states of consciousness just as matter derives from prior states of substance, and that the two are eternally and inextricably linked. It then

elaborates by explaining that consciousness and substance are bridged by the dynamic energy which impresses the ideas of divine thought, through the architects of our visible worlds, onto cosmic substance as the so-called laws of nature (1:14-16).

The second fundamental proposition extends this concept of duality and bipolarity, postulating "the Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane; periodically 'the playground of numberless Universes incessantly manifesting and disappearing,'" each of them being the parent of its successor. "This second assertion of the Secret Doctrine is the absolute universality of that law of periodicity . . . observed and recorded in all departments of nature"— alternations such as day and night, life and death, sleeping and waking (1:16-17, 43).

In speculating upon the night of the universe, that is, the passive condition of the absolute Essence when "darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*Genesis* 1:2), nothing in the boundless infinitude of abstract space is said to exist that finite intellect can comprehend, except perhaps what the Kogi philosophers of northern Columbia call *Aluna*, whose two attributes are Memory and Possibility (or potentiality). Theosophy holds that there is no creation *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing") as usually conceived; but instead a periodically manifested "becoming" within the ever-existing absolute Principle from which emanates the totality of cosmos. While theosophy does "not deny a Creator, or rather a *collective aggregate* of creators," it refuses, "very logically, to attribute 'creation' and especially formation, something finite, to an Infinite Principle" (1:7). The task of "creation" belongs instead to the hosts of intelligent powers, often described as architects and builders:

The whole Kosmos is guided, controlled, and animated by almost endless series of Hierarchies of sentient Beings, each having a mission to perform . . . They vary infinitely in their respective degrees of consciousness and intelligence; and to call them all pure Spirits without any of the earthly alloy "which time is wont to prey upon" is only to indulge in poetical fancy. For each of these Beings either *was*, or prepares to become, a man, if not in the present, then in a past or a coming cycle (Manvantara). They are *perfected*, when not *incipient*, men . . . — 1:274-5

This thought leads naturally to the third proposition which postulates "the fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul — a spark of the former — through the Cycle of Incarnation (or 'Necessity') in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic law," ascending first by natural impulse from mineral, plant, and animal, then by self-induced and self-devised efforts from man up to the holiest archangel. "The pivotal doctrine of the Esoteric philosophy admits no privileges or special gifts in man, save those won by his own Ego through personal effort and merit throughout a long series of metempsychoses and reincarnations" (1:17).

To view this evolutionary ascent as a competitive struggle favoring those who are the most materially, intellectually, or spiritually "fit" would be to misconstrue its meaning and purpose. On the contrary, these three propositions are a statement of our evolutionary mandate which asserts the inherent rights of existence and of ancestry belonging to every living being: that everything in the universe, being divinely originated, is a co-participant and at some level a co-creator; and further, that we are intimately linked with one another in this universal partnership, however separate and disparate we may outwardly appear. As self-aware humans seeded with godlike potential, we each have the capacity to know ourselves and to choose our path into the future. That this implies both free will and the responsibility to act for the welfare of the *whole* cosmos is evident; that we are each an imperfect work-in-progress, equally so. We learn from our errors *and* our successes — and from those of others:

however many proofs [the universe] may exhibit of a guiding intelligence behind the veil, it still shows gaps and flaws, and even results very often in evident failures — therefore, neither the collective Host (Demiurgos), nor any of the working powers individually, are proper subjects for divine honours or worship. All are entitled to the grateful reverence of Humanity, however, and man ought to be ever striving to help the divine evolution of *Ideas*, by becoming to the best of his ability a *co-worker with nature* in the cyclic task. The ever unknowable and incognizable *Karana* alone, the *Causeless* Cause of all causes, should have its shrine and altar on the holy and ever untrodden ground of our heart — invisible, intangible, unmentioned, save through "the still small voice" of our spiritual consciousness. Those who worship before it, ought to do so in the silence

and the sanctified solitude of their Souls; making their spirit the sole mediator between them and the Universal Spirit, their good actions the only priests, and their sinful intentions the only visible and objective sacrificial victims to the *Presence*. — 1:280

Neither *The Secret Doctrine*, *The Mahatma Letters*, nor any other theosophical writing purports to offer the entire esoteric philosophy, or even a "final verdict on existence." Their authors claim only to give a few fragments as an outline to help "lead towards the truth." From eras long before Socrates, students of the perennial wisdom have been counseled that proof is left entirely to each individual, nothing written or spoken is to be assumed or accepted as the final word; for real knowledge cannot be communicated except by first-hand experience, ultimately by a direct beholding requiring perceptive consciousness of a higher order. Nor can the rugged ascent from ignorance to insight be accomplished by science alone, but requires a partnership with philosophy and religion — in other words, the ethical, intellectual, and spiritual disciplines which precede the Mysteries.

This brief summary of foundation concepts hardly does them justice, and from a theistic viewpoint will no doubt appear foreign. Yet impartial study of the origin and ancestry of mankind's spiritual traditions yields ample evidence that these ideas are neither heretical nor peripheral, but are central, fundamental, and universally expressed — a theme to be examined next.

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## Chapter 3

### A Theosophic Synthesis

The net result of investigating any scientific theory or religious teaching which purports to explain the origins of the universe and man is to realize that the universe conceals far more than it reveals, and that dogmatic claims often hinder deeper insights. It wasn't so long ago that "comparative religions" meant demonstrating the superiority of one's own religion by comparing its best features with the worst of others. A far more beneficial approach is to compare the best with the best, and to try to view each tradition as a facet of a diamond, each helping to reflect, amplify, and reveal more fully the jewel's inner fire. This method is especially helpful when attempting to discern the original teachings of a tradition which, owing to imperfections of human nature and the erosive forces of time and politics, almost invariably become overlaid with an opaque crust of conventional interpretation.

If the world's religions are united by a common thread of wisdom-teaching, then one would expect to find glints of that inner fire reflected in them all. This has been the experience of many who have undertaken such a study. For example, Joseph Campbell, building on Carl Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious and his own extensive studies, concluded that there is but "one world mythology," each culture inflecting it with its own unique cycle of stories. Likewise Steuch, Leibniz, Huxley, and others have written of the "Perennial Philosophy" as representing the highest common factor uniting the world's spiritual-philosophical traditions. These unitary threads are discernible, pervasive, and well documented, demonstrating that no religion has a monopoly on truth, but that each is an expression of our universal spiritual heritage.

Many traditions tell a story that begins and ends with nameless mystery, within which all creation and evolution take place. "The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Way. . . . Nameless is the source of heaven and earth" (*Tao Te Ching*). To help us conceptualize That in which "we live, and move, and have our being," theology has named it God or Supreme Being. To help us reach beyond the stereotype, theosophy calls it an abstract *Be-ness*: an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, immutable Principle which, like Plato's Idea of the Good, is "beyond being," adding that it is the "source and origin of force and of all individual consciousness, and supplies the guiding intelligence in the vast scheme of cosmic evolution" (*The Secret Doctrine* 1:15). Yet It or That does not create or evolve anything, something which may be predicated only of a finite being. Rather, from its abstract essential consciousness-substance emanate the hosts of intelligent powers, a near infinitude of architects and builders, whose task is the formation and development of the manifested universe.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" says the language of Judeo-Christian theology, asserting that God created everything out of nothing. Jewish theosophy reexpresses the original Hebrew

somewhat differently, expanding upon and hinting at what is meant by *nothing* or "No-thing." According to the 20th century's preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem:

the Zohar, and indeed the majority of the older Kabbalists, questioned the meaning of the first verse of the Torah: *Bereshith bara Elohim*, "In the beginning created God"; what actually does this mean? The answer is fairly surprising. We are told that it means *Bereshith* — through the medium of the "beginning," i.e., of that primordial existence which has been defined as the wisdom of God, — *bara*, created, that is to say, the hidden Nothing which constitutes the grammatical subject of the word *bara*, emanated or unfolded, — *Elohim*, that is to say its emanation is *Elohim*. It is the object, and not the subject of the sentence. . . . Elohim is the name given to God after the disjunction of subject and object has taken place, but in which this gap is continuously bridged or closed. The mystical Nothing which lies before the division of the primary idea into the Knower and the Known, is not regarded by the Kabbalist as a true subject. The lower ranges of God's manifestation form the object of steady human contemplation, but the highest plane which meditation can reach at all . . . can be no more than an occasional and intuitive flash which illuminates the human heart . . . — *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 221

Arranging this interpretation into a single grammatical sentence, *Bereshith bara elohim* may thus be rendered: "In the beginning, through the medium of primordial Divine Wisdom, the hidden Nothing emanated or unfolded Elohim," who then fashioned the heavens and the earth.\* Despite its usage with singular verbs throughout the Hebrew Bible, *elohim* is nevertheless a plural noun and can be interpreted to mean a collective aggregate or pantheon of creative powers, as overtly hinted in *Genesis* 1:26 and 3:22 ("And Yahweh-Elohim said, Behold the man is become as one of *us*") and implicitly in *Job* 38:4-7 which informs us of the assembly of gods present at creation.

\*Cf. Buddhist Sunyata ("Emptiness") and its relation to the Gnostic Pleroma ("Fullness") in G. de Purucker, "The Void and the Fullness," *Fountain-Source*, 1974, pp. 65-9.

The idea of plurality is preserved in the oldest texts of Mandaean theosophy, derived from the same stream underlying ancient Jewish esotericism. Emigrating from Jerusalem over 1,800 years ago to southern Mesopotamia, the Mandaeans (the "Knowing Ones" who claim John the Baptist as one of their "crowned" or initiated priests) refer to the supreme divine principle as *Hiia*, "Great Life," the originating source as well as the creative and sustaining force of everything in the universe. The Great Life is described as *nukraiiia*, literally "other" in the sense of "remote, incomprehensible, ineffable." Because of its mystery the Mandaeans speak of it in the impersonal plural — the Great Life is not a "He" or an "It," but an abstract "They." From the Great Life emanates the vivifying dual power of Radiance-Burst-Forth and First Mind, who in turn call forth and radiate their son *Yawar* ("Dazzler" or "Awakener") and entrust him *and his brethren* with the creative work of reproducing the cosmos. Note that theirs is a reproductive power, implying the seed of a previous universe. According to formerly secret teachings reserved for postulants, the Great Life is successively active and passive in the cyclic cosmic drama: after retiring into a period of quiescence, it (or "They") manifests again in the two great life-forces and in renewed creation of the universe — reenacted yearly on our terrestrial globe in seed, blade, leaf, and fruit. As above, so below.\*

\*E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasorean Gnosis*, 1960, pp. 1-11, 88-9; *Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans*, 1959, pp. 252-60; *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 1960, p. 5.

Reflecting the older Canaanite/Ugaritic tradition in which Yaw is the son of El, *Deuteronomy* 32:1-9 "tells how when *El Elyon* ('El the Most High') parcels out the nations between his sons, Yahweh [Jehovah] received Israel as his portion" (Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, 2001, p. 132). Yaw, Yawar, and Yahweh, moreover, share significant parallels with the Babylonian Ea (pronounced "ehyah"), the wise and mighty son of the high god Anu, "begotten in his likeness," who "had no rival among the gods his brothers" (*Enuma elish* i.16-20).

In the Sumerian-Babylonian traditions, on which *Genesis* is known to be partly dependent, creation is the work of several deities who fashion the heavens and the earth from preexistent substance. In comparing the Jewish and Babylonian creation stories, Mesopotamian scholar Alexander Heidel noted that the creation of the universe, including matter, from a vacuous nothing by the sovereign will and power of God "cannot be

deduced from the Hebrew verb *bara*, 'to create' . . . there is no conclusive evidence in the entire Old Testament that the verb itself ever expresses the idea of a creation out of nothing . . . [It is only] a connotation which has been read into *bara*" (*The Babylonian Genesis*, 1963, pp. 89-90). Likewise, the identification of Elohim with Yahweh (Jehovah) is a connotation which superseded and eventually hid the term's original and far more philosophical meaning as a plurality of creative powers.\*

\*See also Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, 1992.

The importance of these concepts cannot be overestimated, for their contrast — the notion of a singular masculine jealous God who creates innocent souls at conception with no prior existence, predestined to disparity, injustice, and unmerited suffering — has only served to create "materialism and atheism as a protest against the asserted divine order of things" (*Secret Doctrine* 1:183). Had priests and theologians forthrightly explained that *elohim* is a plural noun; had they mentioned by way of illustration the biblical references which declare that we humans in our inmost essence are also *elohim* because we descend from them, as did Jesus who reminded his people, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, You are gods?'"\*; had they emphasized the allegorical nature of scripture, and that the mysteries and hidden wisdom of God are held to be ultimately knowable†; and, resisting the temptation to oversimplify deeply metaphysical concepts, had they gone back to ancient esoteric roots and perhaps likened the creative gods to a chorus as do the *Book of Job* (38:7) and Navajo tradition in which the "holy ones" sing the universe into existence, then the creation-evolution controversy might be far less polarized and divisive, and less of a hurdle for thoughtful inquirers. Taken together with the powerful evidence of design in nature, here at least would be a basis for a coherent spiritual and scientific dialogue about our origins and ancestry, and about the more important issues of meaning, purpose, justice, and compassion.

\**John* 10:34, 14:12, and *Psalms* 82:6: "I said, 'You are *elohim*, and all of you are sons of the Most High.'"

†*Zohar* 3:152a; Origen, *De Principiis*, iv.i.16; Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, pt. ii, ch. 29, p. 211; *Mark* 4:10-12; *1 Cor* 2:7; and *Gospel of Thomas* 5.

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The story of creation and of the soul's evolutionary journey has been retold countless times by peoples the world over. Myths are meant to be reminders and liberators of forgotten truths, and one very compact version, a modern retelling of an aboriginal myth here pared down to essentials, is suggestive. Retiring then into the quiet of our imagination, into the forest and desert solitudes of the Australian outback, illumined by fire and sheltered by stars, we hear the timeless tale:

*Long long time before our Dreaming, the earth at our feet had no shape, it had no colour, there was no light, and nothing walked across it. It was dust without water, no river flowed, the earth was empty. Into the darkness came the Birirrk. They came from far away and made their tracks on the ground. The Birirrk were our great spirit ancestors. Their tracks across the earth made the Dreaming paths and painted it with light and shadows.*

*The Birirrk could enter the rock. They blew on its face and rocks opened to let them inside. Out of the dust they shaped our mountains and over the land they made the great rivers. When that was done, the Birirrk made the shapes of the animals to live in them. With the water came grass and trees, and the animals to eat the grass, to shelter beneath the trees and to drink at the river. The Birirrk made the shapes of water lilies and the yams. They showed their children, our people, how to find and eat yams and said, "These are yams. Yams are also men."*

*When all this was done, the great ancestors taught their children, our people, about the shape of the kangaroo. "Kangaroo are also men." As the light filled the sky, the Birirrk made the shapes of the birds and taught them how to fly. "These are also men," they told us.*

*They showed us the charcoal from the fires of their great Dreaming tracks and told us, "With these colours you can keep the Dreaming. We will leave soon, but we will return at the Dreaming places through your songs and dances, your painting and your telling."*

*The Birirrk vanished. They became the waterholes, the hills, the rivers and the rocks of the earth, our Mother. They left the stories of making the canoe and of teaching our children. These stories are in the earth. They are the laws that are ours to keep and to keep us.*

*The Birirrk, our ancestors, are in the earth, our Mother. They are in us and in our children at the Dreaming places. These rocks and hills, these rivers and waterholes, are our great ancestors. They are the Birirrk, our spirit."*

— Condensed from *The Birirrk: Our Ancestors of the Dreaming*, told by Gulpilil, L & S Publishing, Cheltenham, Australia, 1983.

This beautiful version is all the more interesting because so remotely ancient in its conception. Like *Genesis*, it begins at the beginning when the earth was without form, "empty," and without light. Yet the world was not created out of nothing, but shaped from a primordial "dust" by divine beings who came from the "far away," who made the Dreaming paths across the ethereal tracings of our preembryonic earth. Painting light and shadows into its silhouette, they *informed* the elements, breathed life into them, entering and actually becoming them. And so too with water. The Birirrk then projected the *shapes* of living beings ("animals"), water creatures to live in the rivers. And with water also came plants and fauna. One discerns an evolutionary biology here, emanating from the first paint of intelligent light which consciously dreams the universe.

Then an extraordinary statement: after "making the shapes" of water lilies and yams, the Birirrk said, "Yams are also men." Kangaroos are men, too, as are the birds. Although aboriginal tradition teaches reincarnation, these affirmations do not imply reincarnation of human souls into lower kingdoms, but allude to something else. The story speaks here in both present and past tense: plants, marsupials, and birds *are* men and, more subtly, "men" — our people, children of the gods — have been here from the beginning.

Theosophy offers a broad interpretive context for this essential set of ideas, frequently using examples from various traditions both to illustrate their meaning and to demonstrate their universality. As in the Hindu teaching of the days and nights of Brahma, whose "day" spans over four billion years followed by a night of equal length, our universe is said to be but one in an infinite series cyclically alternating between activity and repose in endless duration. Being the progenitor of itself, each universe issues from its consciousness and substance the seed and mind pattern of all its kingdoms, from elemental to human to divine. At the time of the last universal dissolution, the seeds of life encapsulating these kingdoms were freighted aboard the "boat of knowledge." Like Noah's ark, it plied the floodwaters of chaos, until Brahma reawakened and earth was raised up once again for a new evolutionary cycle. Manifesting as the trinity of Brahma-Vishnu-Siva, the godhead issued a series of creative impulses represented by the ten avatars or "descents" of Vishnu, who incarnates as a fish, reptile, mammal, and finally as humans of progressively growing self-awareness, ever striving to fashion a more perfected mankind — just as humans ever strive to become more godlike in substance, mind, and spirit: a triple evolutionary scheme.

In all these traditions, whether taught overtly, by hint, or in secret, "Man" is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, for man has always existed. Humanities from previous universes have left their impress on the mind-fabric of nature, providing the architectural forces shaping not only modern man, but all developing life. As an evolving species, "Man" appeared at the beginning of our current world cycle and from his early prototypal forms — hardly sketched on the ethereal tracings of our garden planet — all the lesser kingdoms which people our earth have diverged and evolved. It is for this reason that Man is said to be the parent and repository of the kingdoms below him, the root and trunk of the Tree of Life, if not the tree itself — a microcosm in the macrocosm. This is a teaching echoed in traditions all over the world, giving us pause to wonder why.\*

\*Cf. Hindu Purusha-Prajapati-Narayana-Brahma, Egyptian Atum, Jewish Adam Kadmon, Mandaean-Nasoraean Adam Qadmaia, Eskimo Father Raven, etc., hinting or expressing an anthropic principle represented by most *anthropomorphic* creative deities. This seeming reverse evolution, which posits "Man" as the common ancestor of the kingdoms below him, is too broad and intricate a subject to develop in this brief essay. Readers are referred to *The Secret Doctrine*,

The descent of spirit into matter and the ascent of matter to spirit, involution and evolution, is a fundamental theme of the perennial philosophy: the "Fall" of angels and men, of Adam and Eve donning "coats of skins," of Christ descending to the Underworld, of Prometheus firing nascent intelligence, of the steep and rugged ascent from the cave of ignorance, of the quest for the holy grail, the eternal return to the "great antique heart," the mystical union and companionship with our inner divinity, of samadhi, enlightenment, nirvana, and parinirvana — achieved only to be renounced yet inwardly retained as a guiding compassionate wisdom for the benefit of all.

According to theosophic tradition, the history of our own individuality resumed when the universe reawoke — when once again the One issued the Many — and *remembered* the more stately mansions that each of us may build. Wave after life-wave of monadic beings radiated forth in a majestically sonorous "Let there be light," designing and fashioning through imbodiment after imbodiment the infinitudes of temples, kingdoms, and worlds — all built without sound of hammer, axe, or tool of iron. Hence the Sufi teaching:

I died as mineral, and became a plant,  
I died as plant and rose to animal,  
I died as animal and I was Man.

As humans we reach an equilibrium, a balance of spirit and matter, and a turning point in our evolution. Fired by an awakening self-awareness and the freed power of willing choice, we discover not only the power of mind, but also the arrow of time: a past we have somehow made, and a future that is ours to create — a daunting prospect perhaps, did we not feel the helping and guiding presence of those who have already trodden this ancient and eternal pathway. The poet continues:

Why should I fear, when was I less by dying?  
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar  
With angels blest; but even from angelhood  
I must pass on: . . . — Rumi, *Mathnawi*

In theosophic philosophy, there are no miracles or interventions which suspend the laws of the universe. We reap what we sow, and neither men nor gods can change that. But *we* can change our course and our destiny at any given moment, for we have the power to imagine and to choose intelligently, and thus to help create and evolve a better, wiser, and more compassionate future for us all. What makes man *man* is defined by the very word itself. Having nothing to do with gender, it links back to the root of the Sanskrit verb *man*, "to think." But as a compound of earth and starry heaven, we are far more than our intellect, our desires, or even our noblest inspirations. As emanations — offspring — of that nameless mystery which is beyond our human capacity to conceive, we have forever and eternally unfolding within us that infinite No-thing called memory and possibility: the memory of what we essentially are and can become, and the possibility to creatively fulfill our evolutionary mandate.

Looking to the future — not only to the far horizon of scientific and spiritual imagination, but to the immediate realities which unfold daily before us — the stories of our origin, ancestry, and inner potential help bring into focus what is most important in our lives, the values which endure through all our growing and changing, our living and dying. If our evolutionary journey is said to begin with love and end in wisdom, as the word philosophy implies, there is yet another boundless quality deepened and strengthened by the increasing realization of the oneness of life. Just as the ancient Mysteries recognized "communion and friendship with God" as the fruit of the highest initiatory rite, so Buddhists express it in more human terms: the enlightened ideal personified by the coming buddha called Maitreya, whose name means "friend." As Socrates suggested, many have yet to learn — and trust — that "no divinity is ever ill-disposed towards man," nor is any action on its part due to unkindness. When all is said and done, no matter what we may or may not achieve in a single lifetime or in an eternity of living, we all have the power to be a friend and brother: a thoughtful, caring presence to each and all in this magnificent, challenging, imperfect, yet ultimately harmonious symphony of universal life.

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