

The Secret Doctrine in the Light of 20th-Century Thought

by Jerry Hejka-Ekins

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It is unlikely that a book reviewer receiving *The Secret Doctrine* back in 1888 would judge the work as one that would last beyond a few reprintings. It is a ponderous work of some 1,500 pages, filled with Far Eastern philosophical and religious terms contrasted with nineteenth-century science. But somehow, after a hundred years, *The Secret Doctrine* remains in print and is still being studied. Its basic premises (more or less distorted) have become part of the "new age" philosophies. For instance, the teachings of karma and reincarnation, almost unknown 100 years ago, are now household words. There is also a new age concept that we create our own reality. This is a distant echo of the more inclusive doctrine of *maya* (we live in an illusionary world). What is it about *The Secret Doctrine* that makes it endure and continue to influence today's thinking where other works have been long forgotten? Perhaps it is that the book is really a 20th-century work, written 100 years before its time.

In the sense that *The Secret Doctrine* is concerned with nature's deepest secrets, it is called an "occult" book. It is a work concerned with the hidden side of nature that has never been known by more than a few. The author, H. P. Blavatsky, states that the teachings expounded in this work are to be found scattered in the traditions of the world's great religions, all of which derive from a common tradition. She also states that her work is not a comprehensive textbook on the occult philosophy, but rather, "a select number of fragments of its fundamental tenets, . . ." (I:viii, orig. ed.).

The Secret Doctrine first appeared late in 1888 at the beginning of a time of great material advancement. Science and technology were on the verge of revealing new secrets of nature and creating new gadgets for our comfort. Older views held by religious faith were being eroded by the certainty of "scientific fact." Nineteenth-century science was mechanistic. Our solar system was perceived as a great clock that was doomed to run down some time in the mathematically predictable future. HPB's purpose for writing *The Secret Doctrine* was to counter this materialistic bent:

The aim of this work may be thus stated: to show that Nature is not "a fortuitous concurrence of atoms," and to assign to man his rightful place in the scheme of the Universe; to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all spring; finally, to show that the occult side of Nature has never been approached by the Science of modern civilization. -- Ibid.

Unless the writer of *The Secret Doctrine* had been able to anticipate future discoveries, the book would have quickly become dated in the light of an advancing science. Yet HPB made the prophecy that "It is only in the XXth century that portions, if not the whole, of the present work will be vindicated" (11:442).

What are some of the "fundamental tenets" that are to be vindicated in the twentieth century? Has *The Secret Doctrine* been vindicated? As we approach these final ten years, we are in a position to see how well it has fared. If this book is a 19th-century tome, then it is only an echo of exploded and discarded theories; if not, then it must be one of the most extraordinary books of this age.

The science of HPB's day was still riding on the breakthroughs of the 17th-century theologian, scientist, and mathematician, Sir Isaac Newton. Newton had expressed in mathematical terms the laws of the motions of celestial bodies and the influence of gravity upon them.

This was a remarkable feat. Since that time, the science of physics has been expressed mathematically. By the mid-1870s the prevailing feeling in the scientific world was that we were very close to having enough data to enable us to solve the major mysteries of the universe, leaving little else for science to do.

H. P. Blavatsky saw things differently. Near the end of the first volume of *The Secret Doctrine*, she made the following prophecy:

We are at the very close of the cycle of 5,000 years of the present Aryan Kaliyuga;* and between this time and 1897 there will be a large rent made in the Veil of Nature, and materialistic science will receive a death-blow. -- 1:612

*The Kali-yuga is a cycle mentioned in Indian philosophical works. Its duration is 432,000 years. The present Kali-yuga began in 3102 B.C.

Two very important events occurred during the period specified in this prophecy that resulted in a complete disruption of centuries of scientific and philosophical thought. The first event was an experiment conducted in 1887 (around the time this prophecy was written) by Albert Michelson and Edward Morley, in the USA. It demonstrated that the speed of light was the same, regardless of whether the light traveled with, or at right angles to, the earth's motion. The result of this experiment was a surprise, because it conflicted with the long-assumed idea that light must travel through ether -- a universal substance that was said to have an effect on the speed of light as the light moved through it.

After many failed attempts to make adjustments to allow for this discrepancy, the scientific world was finally forced to rethink the nature of our universe. The problem was not resolved until 1905, when an unknown clerk in a patent office, by the name of Albert Einstein, published a paper, known today as "The Special Theory of Relativity." Einstein pointed out that the concept of ether was

unnecessary if one were to conceive of time as being relative to the observer, rather than absolute. Einstein therefore showed that our common-sense concept that two people in two places, timing the same event with two stopwatches, should get the same results was false, because time is relative to location. To express it another way, time and space, rather than being absolutes, were relative to each other.

By 1915 Einstein had revised his theory to include gravity. His new theory predicted that light was affected by gravity, and that the space-time fabric of the universe followed a curve. This new physics laid the groundwork for such exotic new concepts as that of black holes -- a condition where, under the force of gravity, space-time is curved back upon itself, causing a star to disappear from the universe. As HPB had predicted, we were now living in a very different world.

The second event occurred in 1897. The physicist Joseph J. Thomson demonstrated that the particles that flow through a vacuum tube can be deflected by electric charges. By this method, he determined that these particles were extremely light, having only about 1/2000 the mass of a hydrogen atom. They were later accepted as the ultimate particles of electricity, and called electrons. In 1906 Thomson was awarded a Nobel Prize for establishing the existence of electrons.

The discovery of the electron suggested that it may be a subparticle of the atom. But such an idea resisted serious consideration, because it would lay in ruin the idea of the indivisibility of the atom, held since the time of Democritus.

Yet, in the face of this closely held belief, HPB further stated in *The Secret Doctrine*: "It is on the doctrine of the illusive nature of matter, and the infinite divisibility of the atom, that the whole science of Occultism is built" (I:520).

The idea of the indivisibility of atoms held until 1911, when Ernest Rutherford devised some experiments that proved that the atom was made up of yet smaller particles, and that it was mostly a void. Two years later, in 1913, Niels Bohr constructed a model of the atom with the familiar proton, electrons, and neutrons. Further, more recent research has brought into our language a whole new cast of ever smaller subparticles. We now hear of photons, mesons, nucleons, and of course quarks. All of these and many more come with mirror image subparticles, called antimatter.

Our once clear understanding of matter has become illusive, and our simple atom is becoming increasingly more complex as we look at it more closely.

Another surprising realization concerning the nature of matter came to light in 1926, when it was shown that nothing can be measured precisely on the atomic scale, because matter was unpredictably affected by its very observation.* This marked the beginning of quantum mechanics, where matter is no longer seen as

corpuscular, but rather, atomic subparticles are viewed either in terms of modes of interactions or of force. Therefore, the once clear boundaries between energy and matter have become very blurred. Mass has ceased to be the essential unalterable character of matter and now appears to be one variant of a wider category of energy.

*Heisenberg argues that the energy emitted from a light source necessary for observation would unpredictably change whatever we are observing. This is called "the uncertainty principle."

HPB's assertions concerning the formation of our solar system were also quite ahead of our time. She was opposed to the many modifications on a theory of Buffon, that the planets were created from material torn from the sun by a passing comet or star (1:596-7). To counter this theory, she cited a recent (in her time) spectral analysis of nebulae that revealed that they are made of material substances that are the same as those in the atmospheres of the sun and stars. While considering those data, she states:

This leads to the direct inference that a star is formed by the condensation of a nebula; hence that even the metals themselves on earth are formed owing to the condensation of hydrogen or some other primitive matter, some ancestral cousin to "helium," perhaps, or some yet unknown stuff? . . . And this is the problem that chemistry is trying to solve; and it must succeed sooner or later in the task, accepting *nolens volens*, when it does, the esoteric teaching. But when this does happen, it will kill the nebular theory as it now stands. -- 1:595-6.

And it did. Today, stars as well as our planets are understood to be born out of the condensation of nebulae. In turn, nebulae are the results of older stars casting off their matter as they come to the end of their lives. Those stars are now understood to be the chemical workshops where the elements are created. Once again, HPB's assertions were more correct than the science of her time.

Another scientific prediction in *The Secret Doctrine* concerns comets: comets are chemically different from the elements with which we are now familiar (1:142-3). It is only since the late 1940s that astronomers like Jan Oort and Fred Whipple have suggested that comets may be made of primordial matter, dating back to the early days of the universe. We now have data that tend to support this from the recent rendezvous with Halley's comet.

HPB also stated in no uncertain terms that the moon is older than the earth, and that the moon is not a piece of the earth, separated from it at an early time. Analysis of moon-rock collected in the 1960s is still inconclusive but tends to support this.

These are but a sampling of HPB's predictions concerning matters of astronomy and physics. *The Secret Doctrine* also has a wealth of similar statements concerning geology, the origin and future of man, the interpretation of myths and symbols, as well as an exposition of natural laws that demonstrate an interrelatedness of all that is. The timeliness of her teachings concerning astronomy and physics is astounding. Yet more wonderful things are hidden in this book, awaiting the intuitive reader to discover them. This is indeed a work that will not fall by the wayside with so many exploded theories. The wonders of this book are only beginning to reveal themselves in the light of 20th century thought.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

Several very good books on cosmology written in a nontechnical style are currently available:

- *A Brief History of Time*: Stephen Hawking (1988). Hawking is hailed as the greatest mind since Einstein. This book discusses various questions concerning the nature of our universe and suggested solutions from a historical perspective. Hawking's style is entertaining and nontechnical.
- *The First Three Minutes*: Steven Weinberg (1977). This is still the best overview available of the "big bang" theory of the origin of the universe. Newer data and ideas that question the "big bang" are covered in Hawking's book.
- *Black Holes and Warped Spacetime*: William J. Kaufmann III (1979). Kaufmann is a little more technical than the preceding two authors, but his style is still clear and entertaining.

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