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Recycled Lives

A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy, by Julie Chajes.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy, by Julie Chajes. 2019, Oxford University Press. Hb. £64.00/\$99.00. ISBN-13: 9780190909130.

Reviewed by Paulina Gruffman, Stockholm University, paulinagruffman@gmail.com

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's two books *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) are notoriously difficult to read and interpret. Julie Chajes has set out on the difficult task of doing a close reading of these books to trace the development of Blavatsky's concept of reincarnation, a concept which, according to Chajes, owes a lot to modern conceptions of rebirth in "the West." Contrary to prior scholarship, which has claimed that Blavatsky did not teach reincarnation until the latter book, Chajes succeeds in showing that there was indeed a continuity in her theory of rebirth. While Blavatsky came to change her stance on the form that reincarnation (previously known as metempsychosis) took between the two books, Chajes illustrates that there are certain fundamentals in her thought. Rebirth was always progressive, always had a cyclical element, and always concerned the conservation of life as a form of changeable energy. In addition to bringing light to the development of Blavatsky's thought in her two books, Chajes also examines—expertly—the various discourses that influenced the former's concept of reincarnation. Blavatsky did not develop her theory in a vacuum, but responded to contemporary scholarship on science, Spiritualism, Platonism, as well as Hindu and Buddhist thought. Moreover, Blavatsky did not produce these books alone but was assisted by several individuals in editing her lengthy prose. Subsequently, Chajes argues that Blavatsky's theory of

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reincarnation is best understood as resulting from the interplay with these nineteenth-century discourses.

The book, which is composed of eight chapters, is structured thematically. The first three chapters are “internalist” in orientation and comprise textual analysis of Blavatsky’s two works. Chapters four through seven are “externally” oriented, embedding Blavatsky’s texts into the external discourses—Spiritualist, Platonist, scientific, and Hindu/Buddhist—that were influential in the development of the doctrines of reincarnation and metempsychosis.

My main critique concerns the insistence, on Chajes’ part, that Blavatsky is essential in influencing modern conceptions of reincarnation. Blavatsky, as Chajes has successfully demonstrated, was not the only Theosophist to teach reincarnation, and Blavatsky, despite her central role in the Theosophical Society, did not rule over the understanding of this concept. Rather it was, like any other Theosophical concept, subject to immense debates in Theosophical books and journals. To place Blavatsky at the center of this theory reifies the idea that Blavatsky owned Theosophy. One needs only look to any issue of *Lucifer*, *The Path*, and *The Theosophist* to see that there was a large body of individuals who attempted to explain and understand this notion, both prior to and after Blavatsky. This being said, Chajes definitely succeeds in her ambition to aid in our understanding of *Blavatsky’s* theory of reincarnation. But to claim that this helps us better to understand why and how this notion has come to be “seminal” in today’s understanding of the concept is an overstatement. To better understand how and why reincarnation has come to be so influential in today’s “West,” one ought to consider the plethora of voices that helped defined this concept—Theosophical and other. Chajes sets out to trace the development of the theory of reincarnation in Blavatsky’s thought and she does well in this task. Well-organized, highly informative and lucidly written, the book is relevant for anyone attempting to get a grasp of not only Blavatsky, her Theosophy, and view on reincarnation, but also of early Theosophy more generally.