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The Old Justifies the New:
The Theosophical Society in America's Response to Ethical Problems of Late Modernity

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Honors Research Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethical principles and conceptualizations articulated by members of the Theosophical Society in America in relation to ethical issues of late modernity, specifically to Zygmunt Bauman's problems of universality and foundation. In their responses to issues of late modernity, members of the Theosophical Society employ premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches in their conceptualizations of morality in a unique Theosophical framework. Special attention was paid to the members' use of postmodern ethics.

The data analyzed consists of one- to two- hour long qualitative interviews conducted with individual members of Theosophical Society, as well as documents issued by the Theosophical Publishing House that address ethical issues. The members were asked to explore their own conceptions of morality, specifically with regard to issues of universality and foundation and to the ways that the Theosophical Society deals with problems of ethics.

Members of contemporary society grapple with the problems of universality and foundation in late modernity, and this study of the Theosophical Society illustrates some unique world-constructing methods by which to deal with these problems. There have been few studies on the Theosophical Society, and this paper brings many of their viewpoints to light.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical structures are vital social constructs for the continuation of contemporary society. More directly than epistemological and metaphysical structures, they affect the way that people interact with each other in the world. This paper explores the ethical principles and conceptualizations articulated by members of the Theosophical Society in America. The research focuses on the Theosophical Society's responses to ethical issues of late modernity, specifically to problems of universality and foundation (Bauman 1993). This exploration of the Theosophical Society, or the TS, illustrates some unique world-constructing methods by which members deal with these problems. Special attention was paid to the TS members' use of premodern, modern, and postmodern ethical ideas. There have been few studies on the Theosophical Society, and this paper sheds light on the ethical viewpoints of members of the TS.

According to Philip Jenkins, "cults should be seen as the laboratories or proving grounds for religious innovation, out of which can come much creativity" (2000:227). Jenkins uses the word "cult" to refer to "small, unpopular religious bodies, the implication being that much of their cultish quality comes not from any inherent qualities of the groups themselves, but from the public reaction to them" (2000:18). Although the members of the Theosophical Society generally do not consider the TS to be a cult, it may be considered a cult in Jenkin's use of the term—especially considering the early controversies surrounding the TS. As Jenkins notes, "Some of the major religious transformations of the last century have originated on the margins" (2000:230). If cults are indeed proving grounds, then a study of the Theosophical Society may bring to light new, innovative ways of dealing with the ethical issues of late modernity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society in America, with national headquarters in Wheaton, IL, consists of a small population with diverse ideas. In 1995, the TS had an estimated membership of 30,000 people worldwide. Its American membership consisted of just 4,300 members (Melton 1996:730). The Theosophical Society, often considered the exoteric section of Theosophy, does not present itself as a religion, but rather as an association of individuals who are “in sympathy” with the Theosophical Society’s three “Objects.” This self-presentation differs from that of the esoteric section of the Theosophy, which does enforce specific beliefs onto its members. The current wording of the Theosophical Society’s Three Objects is as follows:

- To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.
- To encourage the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science.
- To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humanity (“The Society’s Three Objects” 1999).

These three objectives of the Theosophical Society represent the ideals that its members see for the Society.

Members of this Society are encouraged to select their beliefs for themselves while undertaking the comparative study of different religions and philosophies. Despite the diversity of belief this study could produce, the members of the Theosophical Society appear to share essential beliefs about morality and ethics. The purpose of this study is to identify the common threads among the stated beliefs of the Society’s members through semistructured in-depth interviews as well as through analysis of the Society’s publications.

Statistical information on the demographic features of the Theosophical Society was unavailable, due to the practice of confidentiality of the membership department. Through attendance at lectures and classes, I discovered that the majority of the membership appeared to be within the upper age range (around fifty years old). In addition, most of the people involved in the Theosophical Society of America seemed to be Caucasian, although there were some references to Indian members (which is understandable, due to the location of the international headquarters in Madras, India).

The Theosophical Society emerged at a time when spiritualism and occultism were emerging interests in many middle-class and professional circles (Campbell 1980; Ellwood 1995; Viswanathan 2000). Colonel Henry Olcott and Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. After the World Parliament of Religions met in Chicago in 1893, Eastern mystical ideas gained a larger presence in America (Jenkins 2000). Moreover, in 1898, the United States acquired some Asian colonies, leading to further cultural exposure to Eastern ideas (Jenkins 2000). This new exposure to Eastern thought, coupled with the contemporaneous interest in Western forms of mysticism, provided an ample breeding ground for Theosophy in America. In addition, the Theosophical Society developed as a result of crises of authority in modernity. According to Ellwood (1995), a problem disturbing many people at the time was the perceived discrepancy between science and religion, especially in the case of the ascendance of evolution and the growing doubts over creationism.

Just as the Theosophical Society was influenced by the culture of its time, the TS has proved a significant influence on American culture. Theosophy is considered one of the sources of the New Age movements (Miller 1995:313). According to Robert Ellwood, the Theosophical Society popularized many Eastern concepts in America, including “astrology, karma, and reincarnation” (1995:315).

Since its inception, the Society has endured its share of controversies and schisms. The Society was tainted by early charges of fraud and plagiarism. William Coleman, a member of the American Oriental Society, continually challenged Madame Blavatsky's published works. After the 1877 and 1888 publications of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, works that are considered amongst Blavatsky's most significant, Coleman published articles pinpointing the rampant plagiarism in these works. In 1884, Emma Coulomb, Blavatsky's housekeeper, published several articles revealing her participation in Blavatsky's fraud. Coulomb admitted that she helped Blavatsky produce several public miracles that supported her claim to possess supernatural abilities (Campbell 1980). In the same year, the Society for Psychical Research said of Madame Blavatsky: "we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters in history" (qtd. in Campbell 1980:93). On top of all these scandals, *Contemporary Literature* published an article in 1898 called "Madame Blavatsky and Her Dupes" (Jenkins 2000). To say the least, this adverse publicity concerning the Society's co-founder and most charismatic leader reflected negatively on the Theosophical Society as a whole.

The existence of Ascended Masters had long been an established belief in the Theosophical Society (Jenkins 2000). Campbell explicitly states that the Theosophical Society was "based on contact with hidden Adepts or Masters" (1980:1). The Ascended Masters, or Mahatmas, were highly evolved spirits who had inspired the formation of the TS. These highly evolved spirits guided the society through letters and other received messages. The belief that Ascended Masters, or Mahatmas, watch over the Theosophical Society was evidently considered central to the Theosophical Society in its earliest years. The Adepts' central position in the Theosophical Society led to a significant number of internal and external controversies. Both Blavatsky and William Judge, another early leader of the Theosophical Society, were accused of

consistently forging letters that were sent from these Mahatmas. The ensuing controversies prompted Edmund Garrett to write: “every Theosophist is in future free to circulate Mahatma messages, but no Theosophist to test their genuineness” (qtd. in Campbell 110). In consequence, the Theosophical Society lost much of its public credibility.

The Adepts’ significance to the Society has waned since the Society’s earliest years. On the official website of the Theosophical Society’s American Section, there is no explicit mention of the Adepts being a central idea in Theosophy. The only reference to the Adepts on the website is within a set of nineteen bullet points in a section with the heading, “Theosophy—in its religious, scientific, and philosophical aspects—offers such concepts as the following for consideration.” Even this bulleted point mentions the Adepts in a mere parenthetical statement: “The evolving entities of the universe include intelligences both less and more advanced than human beings, of whom some of the more advanced (the Masters or Adepts) may serve as helpers and guides to the less advanced.” Clearly, the doctrine of the Adepts is not as important as it had been in the Society’s earliest years.

According to Peter Berger, “to live in a social world is to live an ordered and meaningful life” (1967:21). In his treatise *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger discusses the ways in which communities impose meaning on the world through religious and social influences. The Theosophical Society helps create meaning for its members in the context of a fellowship. In light of its first object, which emphasizes the role of “brotherhood,” the members of the Theosophical Society are encouraged to work as a community to further spiritual goals—despite the Society’s emphasis on individual belief. Thus, it is quite possible that members of the Theosophical Society will share some general ideas on ethics.

According to Ellwood (1995), the Theosophical Society, at its origins, comprised a connection between the old and the new in both belief and practice. He asserts,

The Theosophical movement, then, was a remarkable combination of things new and old that helped provide bridges between several worlds: ancient wisdom and a new age, traditional society and a reformist era, West and East, gender- and class-based religious institutions and a new vision of spirituality yearning to breathe free of such distinctions (1995:323).

In light of this historic function of the TS, it is also quite possible that the Theosophical movement still works as a bridge between the old and the new, the premodern and the late modern.

Ethical Issues of Late Modernity

In *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), Zygmunt Bauman, one of few sociologists who have written about postmodern ethics, discusses two main problems of late modernity. Bauman first discusses the building blocks of modern ethics: universality and foundation. He provides two similar definitions for both universality and foundation—one from the viewpoint of legislators, and another from the viewpoint of philosophers. Bauman defines philosophical universality of ethics as:

that feature of ethical prescriptions which compelled every human creature, just for the fact of being a human creature, to recognize it as right and thus to accept it as obligatory (1993:8).

Thus, ethical universality could be described as a moral directive that is common to all humans. The important implication in this definition is that universal moral directives are not particular to any culture, tradition, or time period; rather, what makes a moral directive universal is its applicability to all situations at all times.

Bauman defines philosophical ethical foundation with the following assertion: “For the philosophers, rules would be well founded when the persons expected to follow them believe, or

could be convinced, that for one reason or another following them was the right thing to do” (1993:8-9). Ethical foundation deals with the justification of a moral principle. While universality deals with the applicability of moral principles across situations, foundation deals with the justification of that applicability.

In Bauman’s view, the primary goal of modern ethical inquiry has been to establish a completely universal and unmistakably justified system of ethics; in other words, an undeniable ethical order suitable for all times and places (1993:9). In *Postmodern Condition* (1984), Lyotard examines the ways in which the grand narratives of modernity continually replace one another in a succession of worldviews attempting to impose order on the world. In Lyotard’s view, ethical systems are the elements of grand narrative that create systems of moral belief. In the late modern period, even ethical systems have come into question.

Bauman’s *Postmodern Ethics* was reviewed by *The Quest: Journal of the Theosophical Society in America* shortly after its publication. In his review, William Metzger states that it “bear[s] close reading and considerate reflection” (1994:85). Metzger saw Bauman’s conceptualization of ethics as valuable to the TS membership, as did the editors who decided to include Metzger’s review in the Theosophical journal.

The Premodern, the Modern, and the Postmodern

According to Bauman, the unbelief in the possibility of the absolute universality and unshakable foundation of any structured moral code constitutes the postmodern ethical condition. He describes this postmodern ethical situation as follows:

The foolproof—universal and unshakably founded—ethical code will never be found; having singed our fingers once too often, we know now what we did not know then, when we embarked on this journey of exploration: that a non-aporetic,

non-ambivalent morality, an ethics that is universal and ‘objectively founded,’ is a practical impossibility; perhaps also an *oxymoron*, a contradiction in terms (1993:10).

Because there is no possibility of a completely universal and well-founded moral code, Bauman (1993) proposes a new way of looking at ethics—a *postmodern* ethics—that emphasizes the individual volition in the practice of active compassion for the Other on a situation-by-situation basis. John Caputo (2000) likewise advances an ethics that emphasizes being for the “wholly other” and making non-obligatory “gifts” to the other. Like Bauman, Caputo discusses the lack of foundation and universality in the late modern age, and adds to that the pervasive idea that the future is uncertain. Caputo emphasizes the state of being-for-the-other and the practice of altruism in interpersonal moral relationships (2000).

In his article, “Poststructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community” (2003), Jeffrey Popke uses Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy to propose an ethics similar to that of Bauman in light of the destabilizing influences of poststructural thought. He emphasizes responsibility towards the other. He suggests “abandon[ing] the traditions of modern ethical thinking, and the metaphysics of ontothology [sic] and sovereignty upon which they are based, in favor of an ethics and politics of deconstruction” (2003:312). He, too, resituates ethical responsibility within the individual in a constant awareness of his or her relationship to other people.

Gianni Vattimo situates his ideas within the late modern problems of universality and foundation as well. In response, he advocates “weak thought” in ethical discernment. Vattimo describes weak thought as an integration of hermeneutics and nihilism (Rose 2002). In weak thought, one continues to question traditional structures and cultural forms of “world-

construction” (Berger 1967), without sinking into any absolute condition of either complete nihilism or complete metanarrative (Rose 2000). According to Vattimo,

The tradition supplies the foundations with which one can appropriate and perceive truth, yet one is simultaneously aware that they are bounded and but one representation of truth, limited by their very own possibility of understanding (Rose 2000:65)

Vattimo emphasizes the function of tradition in imposing order on one’s perception of the world, but he also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging that the truth expressed by one tradition is not absolute and all-encompassing. One’s limited understanding corrupts the discernment of truth. Thus, one’s understanding of the world is inherently and consistently unstable (Rose 2000).

According to Paul Heelas (1993), the New Age, of which Theosophy is usually considered a major constituent, incorporates the premodern, the modern, *and* the postmodern in its practices and systems of thought. According to Heelas,

[The New Age] would appear to have a great deal to do with the premodern, drawing much of its practices and wisdom from the great and minor religious traditions. Yet it has recently been argued that it is, par excellence, the religion of postmodernity. To complicate things further, it has also been claimed that the New Age is part and parcel of dynamics constitutive of modernity. It appears that the ‘movement’ (as it is commonly designated) somehow collapses the conventional periodization of change (1993:103).

Heelas makes the claim that the New Age movement fits into neither the premodern, modern, or postmodern categories completely. Within the New Age movement, “the new relies on the old, for ‘wisdom,’ practice,’ and—the academic might add—legitimization” (Heelas 1993:109). It is

apparent that “old,” more traditional, more premodern elements of thought and practice are used to provide a more stable foundation for new spiritual ideas.

Heelas also discusses briefly the issue of authority within the New Age. Heelas claims that authority is located within the self. However, Heelas makes an interesting point about the construction of the New Age self. According to Heelas, “There is an Other, albeit lying within, which stands in a relationship of eternality with regard to the utilitarian person (or ego) and which can thus serve as an authoritative foundationalism” (1993:109). The eternal Self within the culturally conditioned self creates a stable foundation within the individual upon which ethical discernment can be made.

The following table indicates the characteristics of premodern ethics, modern ethics, and postmodern ethics. Table 1 was developed using Bauman’s (1993) conception of premodern, modern, and postmodern, with some help from Frederick Ferré’s (2001) elucidations of these three periods. This table does not provide an exhaustive nor conclusive delineation of all concepts encapsulated by the premodern, modern, and postmodern periods, nor does it represent a large variety of thinkers. Instead, it provides defined distinctions from two specific authors according to which the information gathered in the interviews may be coded. The analysis assumes the validity of these categories.

I will use these characteristics to locate the common ethical themes identified in the responses of interviewed members of the Theosophical Society within these respective periods. This table was developed *a priori*—before any data was collected—in order to provide a concrete, objective framework according to which data could be analyzed. Not all of the cells are used for the final analysis. In addition, there exist some gaps in Bauman’s analysis—Bauman did not cover all of the concepts and themes expressed by members of the Theosophical Society, such as the ideas that fact and value are united and that language and structure is non-transparent. If a pre-

test of the study had been conducted, perhaps these themes could have been identified and defined within the chart as premodern, modern, or postmodern before the full execution of the study. However, this pretest was not possible due to the short time schedule of the study.

Table 1. Characteristics of Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Ethics.

	Issue	Premodern ethics	Modern ethics	Postmodern ethics
Relationship between humans and morality	Humans' essential relationship to morality	All humans are essentially evil and outside of nature; since God embedded morality within the universe, humans are inherently alienated from this law	General, rational principles of morality are necessary to aid humans in community life; humans may determine these through systems of logic	Humans are essentially ambiguous—neither good nor evil in the categorical sense of the terms—but they are social creatures, and their social impulses encourage them to act ethically
	Human impulse	Individual impulses within humans are chaotic and must be harnessed with the help of divine legislation and/or inspiration	Individual impulses within humans are either good or evil and should be categorized and controlled through legislation	Individual impulses within humans are permanently ambiguous and should be examined critically with the help of open communication
	Individual roles	Individuals have fixed, assigned roles, and rules are ascribed to these roles	Individuals have multiple roles that are separable from one another, and have constrained autonomy for acting within these roles—social norms and legislations exert heavy influence on which roles the individual prioritizes	Individuals have multiple roles that can conflict, and the individual determines which role(s) is/are most relevant in each decision
	Moral priorities	Reverence and obedience for divine law or law embedded in nature	Adherence to legislation determined through tests of reason	Clear, open, interpersonal and intercultural dialogue
	Primary moral orientation	Morality is being for God	Morality is being with the Other	Morality is being for the Other

Authority	Moral authority	Morality can be found in nature and/or God's law	Rational, objective moral systems determined by qualified experts	Social impulses associated with the communal, "for-the-other" nature of humanity
	Legislating authority	Rigid law. Divinely ordained experts determine God's law AND/OR Philosophers, through transcendent thought, uncover moral law embedded in nature	Objective moral systems determined by qualified experts through universally rational means. Individuals have autonomy in interpreting these moral systems and applying them to situations	Moral autonomy liberated from heteronomy. The autonomous moral self should determine ethical choices situation-by-situation, person-by-person. Distrust of "experts," laws, and overarching systems of ethics.
Universality of conceptualization	Conception of truth and value	Only one acceptable truth and "good" determined by representatives of a transcendent source (Platonic realm or God)	Only one acceptable truth and "good" determined by individuals following systems of rationality	Pluralism of acceptable truths and "goods" determined by a multiplicity of perspectives
Universality of application of ethical principles	Issue of universality in legislation	Moral laws apply only to the group for which they are made, but each group considers itself morally superior because it is assured of divine sanction	Universality in ethics is held as ideal and can be reached through rational thought and the corresponding legislative systems	Rejection of the idea of universality in individual ethics; no possibility of a generalized consensus on the proper form of action in every situation
	Obligations of others toward the self	Individuals may expect that others within their own community follow the same rules as they, because those in that community revere the same indisputable God. Those outside the community follow other rules because they are morally inferior and do not have the proper understanding of or relationship with God or nature	Individuals may insist that others follow the same ethical systems as they because these systems are rationally universal, and because the division of labor requires cooperation	Individuals may not hold moral expectations of others because of the non-universal plurality of ethics. Moreover, morality consists of acting for the greater good of the Other without the expectation of reward or reciprocation

Key terms	Key terms	divine law, law embedded in nature, universal Logos, reverence, obedience, moral ethnocentrism, moral particularity	rationality, universality, consensus, objectivity, systematization	pluralism, open dialogue, ambiguousness, no rational systems, accepting responsibility for the Other
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The late modern ethical condition derives from the destabilization of modern ethics in that it actively acknowledges the hitherto failure of universality and foundation in ethical codes.

Postmodern ethics presents only one possible response to the failure of modern ethics—the refutation of the possibility of complete universality and foundation in any ethical code. The main problem that the late modern ethical condition presents is that of finding ways to deal with the hitherto failure of universality and foundation in light of deeply impressed modern beliefs in the two ideals of universality and foundation. This paper examines common themes in the ways in which members of the Theosophical Society use their epistemological resources to respond to this problem of the late modern ethical condition.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis. Data was collected from two main sources: in-depth, semistructured interviews with ten self-professed members of the Society, and publications released from the Theosophical Publishing House located in Wheaton, IL. Quotations taken from semistructured interviews appear in italics, while those taken from documents appear in normal typeface. This formatting is used in order to make a clear distinction between the data gathered from interviews and those gathered from documents.

Document Analysis

Two main types of documents were used for analysis. The first type consists of works written by “experts” of the Theosophical Society such as Robert Ellwood, the National Vice President of the Theosophical Society in America, and Radha Burnier, the International President of the TS. The documents analyzed were limited to works published between 1985 and 2005. This date range was chosen to limit the scope of ethical statements to those developed in recent years. This type of document represents a collection of statements from those who are heavily involved in the Society and more aware of the nuances of Theosophical ideas.

The second type of document consisted of articles published in *The Quest: Journal of the Theosophical Society in America* from April 1985 to April 2005. Each issue of *The Quest* contains the following statement on the inside cover: “The Theosophical Society in America is not responsible for any statement in this magazine by whomever made, unless contained in an official document of the Society. The opinions of all members are their own.” Articles and letters published in this journal express a wide range of ideas from people in sympathy with the Three Objects, as well as ideas which the editors deem to be valuable for discussion within the Society. In addition, the inside cover of *The Quest* adds that “**The Quest** is the official journal of the Theosophical Society in America,” and that “Members of the Theosophical Society in America receive the *Quest* magazine as part of their annual dues.” The first statement emphasizes the official nature of the journal, while the second emphasizes the breadth of its readership and potential authorship. In light of these statements and the fact that the issues contain writings from people of diverse opinions and backgrounds, as well as Letters to the Editor, one may view this journal as a regulated, official forum in which members can discuss issues of the time. As a forum, it is not considered completely free, but it represents a balance between official documentation and freedom of thought.

Interview Sample

The sample for this study was determined through a process of *snowball sampling*. During the course of each interview, each respondent was asked for a reference to another local member of the Theosophical Society. An attempt was then made to interview the suggested respondents. I began sampling by interviewing already-existing contacts with members local to the national headquarters of the Theosophical Society in America, such as officers from the Society's Department of Education and the Olcott National Library, and attendees at programs held by the Society. All of the members of the participant population were self-professed members of the Theosophical Society over the age of eighteen. In addition, all of the informants were paying members of the Theosophical Society within the past six months.

The ages of the informants ranged from late twenties to late sixties. Since the majority of the membership is within the upper age range (around fifty years old), the informants interviewed reflected this dominant age range. In addition, the participant sample included members native to the Midwest as well as members raised in European nations.

Informants exhibited a wide range of involvement in the Society. Members with a high involvement in the Society were interviewed, such as those holding paid and volunteer positions within the society. Some taught lectures and classes at the Theosophical Society on a contract basis. Some of the informants attended lectures and seminars on an infrequent basis, and some claimed to be on-and-off members.

Interview Procedures

Upon making contact with a potential respondent, arrangements were made to meet the respondent in a safe location of his or her choice. The respondent was then requested to read and

sign an informed consent form. Upon complying with the respondent's approval or disapproval of having the interview tape-recorded, I began an informal conversation that hit upon the ethical principles that the respondent believes to be endorsed by the Theosophical Society in America. These interviews typically lasted between one hour and two hours. After the interview, the respondent was assured again of the confidentiality of the study and was supplied with my contact information. Pseudonyms were used in all discussion of these informants.

Sample Questions

The purpose of these semistructured interviews with informants was to explore each member's conceptualization of ethics in late modern society. Special attention was paid to their responses to the newfound instability of the universality and foundation of ethics. For example, informants were asked to expound on their ideas of the origin of morality, of ways of determining "right" and "wrong," if these moral qualifiers are relevant, and of how to interact with people of different value systems.

In the case that examples were needed to further illuminate an informant's position, the researcher was prepared to ask questions on the following topics: Euthanasia, Same-Sex Marriage, Abortion, Lying, Cheating, Breaking Promises, Stealing, Public Dress and Nudity, Genetic Engineering. In some situations, the informant's responses to these ethical situations were explored. A number of sample questions are outlined below.

- What do you think morality means to the Theosophical Society?
- Where does morality come from?
- How does the Theosophical Society differ from the mainstream society when it comes to these issues?
- How can someone know what is "right" or "wrong"?

- Is anything implicitly “right” or “wrong”? How would one know?
- Are there any universal conditions for morality? Would only a selected few really know what is right to do? Why? Should this type of issue be considered only on a person-by-person, situation-by-situation basis? How?
- If someone close to you held the opposite conviction as you do in a moral issue, how would you respond? Would you respond? Would you try to convince the person otherwise, would you talk openly to the person about the issue, would you avoid discussing the issue with the person, would you openly disapprove of the person, would you do a combination of those things, or would you do something else? Why?
- Would you consider morality to fall under the moral jurisdiction of religion, law, or the individual? Why? How?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Members of the Theosophical Society in America expressed varying views on the foundation and universality of morality. Some of the members who were interviewed did not have a clear perspective on morality; in fact, many of them talked through the concepts, sometimes contradicting previous statements that they had made in the course of the interviews. The goal of this analysis was not to define a specific stance towards morality as *the* stance of the Theosophical Society, but rather to examine threads of thought that were common among the ten members of the Theosophical Society who were interviewed. Some of the common ethical ideas identified amongst members of the Theosophical Society in America were:

- The unity of all things
- The union of fact and value as opposed to the modernist notion of the fact-value distinction

- Non-transparency of language and structure; the idea that language and structures of thought do not do justice to the fullness of reality
- Legislative authority of the self
- The constant search for truth
- Implicit universal consensus
- Impracticality of complete consensus due to the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives as well as the provisional nature of language and belief
- Inner self as other
- Foundation situated within the cosmic harmony

Many of these common ideas demonstrate a postmodern transformation of premodern ideas in light of the modern project. The integration of fact and value is both a premodern and a postmodern idea. The idea that language and formal structure is non-transparent and provisional is a trend of the late modern period, as well as the postmodern. The notion of karma and the oneness of the universe is a premodern concept. The notion of the inner Self as other to the superficial self is a premodern concept that has undergone a postmodern transformation. The concept of the implicit consensus is certainly a result of the modern project, although its treatment has both premodern (in its attention to old traditions) and postmodern nuances (in its refusal to accept the idea of a full consensus in practice). Likewise, the notion of an ethical foundation within the fabric of the universal oneness is a postmodern transformation of premodern ideas made in response to the late modern drive towards finding ethical foundation. The idea that the individuals should make moral decisions for themselves is considered late modern and postmodern. The underlying value of democracy and equality in the Theosophical path is a

modern concept. The idea that individuals are always learning and should never assume to know all the proper ethical principles is a highly postmodern idea.

Despite the Theosophical Society's use of premodern traditions to legitimize new ideas, members of the Theosophical Society cannot regress to traditional worldviews completely because of the mainstream social value placed on the modern project, with all its emphasis on foundation and universality through reason. The ethical stances examined then must not be viewed as if in a cultural vacuum, but instead within the cultural context of late modernity.

The Unity of All Things

Many Theosophists take as their starting point the premise that all things in the universe are interconnected in a harmonious fabric. A change imposed on anything in the universe will cause changes to other, related things in the universe. Oftentimes, this sense of universal oneness is directly related with the concept of the divine or the transcendent in that this universal oneness is either composed of the divine or has elements of the divine. This notion of the universal oneness could be considered a premodern notion traceable to Eastern traditions that members of the Theosophical Society adopt to frame their late modern world. The old, traditional status of this idea brings it legitimization in a modern world that places such value on the legitimization of systems of knowledge.

In his 1999 *Quest* article "Cloning the Buddha," Richard Heinberg describes "perennial philosophy," a belief system that is often associated with the New Age movement. In his description of perennial philosophy, he states, "each human being is a particularized expression of a universal sacred reality that we each strive to embody and express—a reality whose qualities are identifiable as compassion, justice, truth, and love." Thus, Heinberg states the belief that

everything, even humans, are interrelated in their common experience of a “sacred reality.” Mr. Z described it as “*one life penetrating through us.*”

Ursula, a member of the Theosophical Society with moderate involvement, constructed the following metaphor to describe the relationship between the individual and the oneness of the cosmos:

[Y]ou know what they say about holograms? That if you break a hologram, if you break one really hard, all the fragments will have the whole hologram embedded in each piece. . . . So, I believe that no matter which fragment you're exploring, it has embedded in it the truth. The Truth with a capital T.

Ursula's metaphor essentially expressed the idea that all things and all people share a divine presence within them as a result of the universal oneness.

Susan, a highly involved member of the Theosophical Society, made the following assertion about the oneness of the universe:

There is one basic . . . we call it the fundamental proposition in Theosophy. And that fundamental proposition—and, that is a hypothesis on which the entire Theosophical worldview is based—that all life in the universe is one. And that is the underlying principle. And you may call that an ethical principle, if you wish.

In this statement, Susan not only expressed the idea of the universal oneness, but she also made a direct link between metaphysical principles and ethical principles. By doing so, she blurred the traditional distinction between fact and value by stating that this idea is an ethical principle as well as a metaphysical principle.

Union of Fact and Value

Like Susan, many members of the Theosophical Society who were interviewed neglected the traditionally modern distinction between fact and value. In the midst of their explorations of ethical principles, they smoothly entered discussion on metaphysical principles such as universal oneness and karma.

In his 1998 *Quest* article “The Truth & the Goodness of Nature,” Klaus Klostermaier, a Professor of Religion, refutes the fact-value distinction that is so prevalent in modern science and philosophy. Klostermaier asserts that fact and value are interrelated elements of the same reality. In this sense, he directly sympathizes with premodern thinkers: “For most premodern thinkers in East and West, it was evident that an understanding of reality contained not only truth, but also goodness, and that ‘truth’ was primarily and fundamentally a value and not a fact” (1998: 36-37). Like Klostermaier, many members of the TS who were interviewed viewed value to be interrelated with truth. In their discussion of ethics, most of them dealt directly with the idea of reality and truth. For many of them, principles of reality were directly comparable to principles of value.

When asked how he determines his values from his picture of reality, Samuel, a moderately involved member of the TS, made an assertion about the union of fact and value:

[I]t's on a theoretical level that you can make a difference [between fact and value], but on the existential level . . . you're experiencing it—right away—as values already, as meaningful. . . . there's no mediating . . . calculating comes mostly as a reaction to your immediate experience anyways.

Thus, according to Samuel, value is imposed on something as soon as it is experienced. To him, the distinction between values and facts exists only on a theoretical level, and not on a practical level.

The idea of a breakdown of the modernity fact-value distinction was not coded in Table 1, due to the conceptual gaps felt by the thinkers on which the table is based. However, a discussion of the fact-value distinction as a modern construct can be found in the work of Irina Davydova and Wes Sharrock (2003).

This reunion of fact and value is a postmodern phenomenon in the face of the destabilization of the modernist myth of fact-value distinction. This idea may be also considered postmodern in its active criticism of modern constructs.

Non-transparency of Language and Structure

In addition to the destabilization of the alleged separation of fact and value, the destabilization of language and structure was expressed in many of the statements made by TS members. For example, Frank, a highly involved member of the TS, made the following statement: *“words are like so meaningless, in terms of all these words that are describing things that are beyond words and thoughts.”* To a certain degree, many members of the TS believe that language does not do justice to the fullness of reality. All of the interviewed members interviewed agreed that absolute structures of law cannot express what is right for all occasions. The idea of the non-transparency of language and structure may be considered both a late modern and a postmodern development—it is the acknowledgement that even the structures used to explain the world in metanarratives are ultimately unreliable.

Some members go so far as to express ideas about the provisional nature of language. In a statement about the ethics of preaching, Samuel spoke of the provisionality of language:

[A]s long as what you preach is seen as provisional. Because the preacher is on the way to a deeper understanding. So, what he preaches and the words used in preaching are provisional. That, to me, is very important in the role of language in

morality. That every statement, every theory . . . is all provisional. Language is provisional.

In this statement, Samuel asserts his belief that things expressed in language should not be considered absolutely true for all times. According to Susan, “*You have an ethical structure . . . which probably varies as you grow, mature, and change in your whole life. So, I think our ethical values—our whole concept of value—changes*” expresses the same idea of the provisional nature of language. Things that are preached or stated can change over time, as can values.

In light of the inherent instability of structures of knowledge, the Theosophical Society has rejected the primacy of any preexisting worldview over another. In doing so, the TS rejects the idea that a formal, external structure of knowledge and belief may express any absolute truth or value. Greg, a highly involved member of the Theosophical Society, asserts that the social sense of morality reflects law and culture, and that one must be aware of one’s cultural milieu. In his *Quest* article, Klostermaier even makes a movement towards the destabilization of science: “Scientists are in fact not looking out for nature but for a confirmation of the artifacts of science” (1998:39). He discusses the failure of the modern project to eliminate the ambiguity of nature by discovering (or imposing) rules for it. Theosophical Society members’ destabilization of language and formal structures of knowledge is considered primarily a postmodern phenomenon, although the gaps in Table 1 do not include this idea in its periodization. In its use of different religious traditions, the Theosophical Society generally does not hold one tradition over another. Susan’s sentiment, “*I think you will find there is no one system of morality, there is no one system of ethics,*” was repeated in many of the other interviews. In his 1999 *Quest* article “Cloning the Buddha,” Richard Heinberg states,

Scholars have compared the beliefs and practices of various cultures and deconstructed ancient texts, revealing universal motifs and undermining the idea that any particular religion embodies some unique and absolute truth.

In light of this idea, many in the Society have reconstructed their own worldviews by examining different elements of different religions.

The Theosophical Society exhibits a criticism and destabilization of metatheories involving knowledge and ethics, but it also displays a movement towards reconstruction of ethics in the ways that its members deal with failing universality and foundation. According to Mr. Z, a highly involved member of the TS, “*we’re here to co-create things with other people.*” In his interview, he emphasizes the importance of discussion in a brotherhood in order to create new ideas about the world.

The Second Object of the Theosophical Society is “To encourage the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science.” Within this statement, the Theosophical Society places religion on equal footing with philosophy and science. This standpoint corresponds with the Theosophical Society’s motto, “There is no Religion Higher than Truth.” A member is encouraged to critically examine the three primary sources of authority in society—religion, science and philosophy—and thereby determine a path for him and herself. This prescription locates moral authority within the individual.

Many Theosophists prescribe meditation as a means of coming to a greater understanding of reality outside of the mechanism of language. According to Robert Ellwood,

The wisdom upon which the path depends is not simply verbal knowledge about philosophical truths, however profound. All words are relative and we must go beyond them. . . . It is awareness greater than words, awareness which begins with awareness of one’s true nature as one with the true nature of the universe in which

we are embedded—an awareness which comes by meditation, stilling the outer layers of consciousness so that the innermost can shine forth with its light
(1986:120-121)

The individual must become aware of reality in an understanding beyond words. To do this, one must discover the inner self.

Authority of the Self

The issue of moral foundation is directly related to that of authority. Authority is the practical element of the broader philosophical problem of moral foundation. Who or what has the right to decide what is ethical, what is right? According to all the members of the Theosophical Society who were interviewed, the authority for determining moral action ultimately rests within the individual. Religion, philosophy, and science may bring insight as minor authorities on morality, but the individual is the one who must decide in the end. At one lecture held at the Theosophical Society in March 2005, the lecturer prefaced her speech with a long disclaimer that she speaks only of her experience. She urged her audience to “*use discernment*” and to take everything she says “*with a grain of salt*” in her assertion that everyone there should decide individually how to treat her lecture, whether skeptically, sympathetically, or adamantly.

Moral authority rests within the individual rather than systems of ethics because of the view that many members of the Theosophical Society have towards language. Like Frank, many of them believe that language cannot do justice to the boundlessness of truth. According to Ellwood, “the difference in wording [of some core ideas of Theosophy] and in the exact scope of the lists shows that the way theosophy is understood and expressed is always an individual matter” (1986:20). Fully true and exhaustive systems of thought and ethics cannot be put forth because of the fallibility of language; it is up to the individual to work towards a wordless, unstructured

understanding of right and wrong. Many members spoke of heeding one's intuition in moral decisions. When asked what they would do in certain ethical dilemmas, many members felt free to say that they would not know what they would do until they were actually in those situations and could evaluate the nuances of those situations.

Like the idea of the non-transparency of language and structure, the placement of ethical authority within the individual's internal sense of right and wrong is a postmodern development. While premodern traditions attempt to place legislative authority upon law determined by divinely ordained experts, and modern thinkers attempt to place it upon ethical systems established and confirmed through reason, the postmodern approach situates legislative authority upon individual discernment according to each situation. Many of the members interviewed expressed this postmodern approach to legislative authority.

In the following passage, Jackson describes the Theosophical Society's stance towards the discovery of truth:

Theosophists are aware that the worldly systems of knowledge and belief are but shadows of the truth. This awareness serves as a prod to seekers to look for 'better' answers in Theosophy, which urges them, in turn, to test its truths for themselves (1998:10).

Thus, Jackson connects the awareness of the provisional nature of language and systems with the drive towards constant seeking that is so prevalent in the Theosophical Society.

The Individual's Constant Search

In addition to their sense of the provisional nature of language, many members of the Theosophical Society profess a constant state of not-knowing. All but one of the members interviewed directly expressed the idea that the individual is constantly searching for truth and/or

value.. Richard Brooks, in a Founders Address printed in *Quest*, describes the status of knowing and knowledge that members of Theosophical Society typically profess:

As members of the Theosophical Society, we profess to be *seekers* for truth, not defenders of some dogma imposed upon us by a theologian, philosopher, scientist, or political leader. . . . We assume that we are not yet in possession of the whole truth—or at least we profess to believe that (1998:4).

According to Brooks, members of the Theosophical Society generally possess an inconclusive conception of truth. In their perpetual search for truth, they always remain consciously in the stage of not-knowing. In Jackson's words, "The Path is based on the premise that one does not already know the truth, but is in the process of discovering it" (1998:11). Many members of the TS believe in a constant, critical search for truth. In the semistructured interviews, a considerable number of members made statements about the changeability of moral structures.

According to Samuel, "*I, myself—or anybody is—always on the way toward a deeper understanding. What they think is a deeper understanding might not even be a deeper understanding, it might even be a more shallow understanding.*" In other words, there is always the possibility that a firmly held belief fails to present a full understanding of a given situation. In another example, John spoke of the constant questioning that results from the precariousness of moral decisions:

[W]hat are the legal consequences of my decision, is it something that I'm happy with, how does it affect my religious community, how is everybody going to react, how do I personally feel about it. . . all of these things—it's an ongoing, constant process. There's no resting point. . . . there's no final resting point . . . there's constant engagement, it always goes further. . . . There's always further to go.

The ideal is to constantly question one's ideas of right and wrong. Carol, a highly involved member of the Theosophical Society, advised, "*hold your beliefs lightly, because they're going to change.*" According to her, "*beyond beliefs is truth,*" and truth may be discerned only if one avoids clinging to established beliefs.

Frank framed the issue in terms of the possibility of changing values in a society: "*one good thing about the society that you're born into, whatever they consider moral, you go along with it, but try to change it at the same time.*" Just as individuals are in a constant search for answers to the problems of morality, societies are perpetually changing their moral ideas.

The notion of the search of justifiable moral principles is modern at its origins. However, the conscious admission that this search is unending may be considered a postmodern development. In a world in which values appear to be transient and ambiguous, a postmodern response to the failure of foundation and universality would be to assert that there would always be this constant search.

Implicit Universal Consensus

In spite of their professed respect for diversity, many members of the TS believe that, if only all people were aware of certain Theosophical principles—for example, the unity of all things—then all people would be inspired to follow a vague yet certain set of values. All of the informants, for the exception of two, referred to this idea of an implicit consensus in their semistructured interviews. According to John Algeo's "A Portrait of Theosophy,"

Theosophy addresses the cause rather than the symptoms of the human disease.

Theosophy seeks to make humanity aware—intellectually, affectively and experientially—of our unity with one another and with the whole universe. From such awareness will flow naturally and inevitably a respect for differences, a wise

use of the environment, the fair treatment of others, a sympathy with the afflictions of our neighbors, and the will to respond to those afflictions helpfully and lovingly (1995:98).

Thus, Algeo asserts that certain values—his values—would be discovered by all people who were simply made aware of the universal unity.

In accordance with this idea, many Theosophists also believe that all people would come to an unspoken consensus (usually on Theosophical ideas) on the path to discovery. According to Jackson, “the requirement of Theosophy is that all persons rediscover the truth of our doctrines for themselves by their own efforts” (1998:11). Of course, this truth cannot be enforced, imposed, or even expressed fully through words, so it is up to individuals to discover it on their own. As a lecturer hosted at the National Center of the Theosophical Society in March 2005 asserted, “*there are so many ways to describe a thing, that even though we say different words, we speak different languages, we convey our messages in different manners, duly speaking for the most part, we’re all headed in the same direction.*” This lecturer expressed the idea that despite the different ways people think about and express ideas, all people are headed towards the same implicit conclusion. In his discussion of the universality of ethics, Samuel states, “*I think our human destiny—and its derivative, morality—is that we’re all called to uncover this [‘sense of ultimate justice’].*” According to Samuel, all people share in the possibility of finding the same sense of ultimate justice.

In his 1998 article, “Dogma and the Fourth Object of Society,” Brant Jackson responds to an article written by Daniel Caldwell, “Does Theosophy Have Core Doctrines?” In a refutation of individualistic relativism, Caldwell (1997) had made the claim that Theosophy has core doctrines. In his article, Jackson responds to Caldwell by making the distinction that while Theosophy itself may have core doctrines, the Theosophical Society does not. According to Jackson, “The Society

exists to promulgate a certain doctrine or teaching, which the Mahachohan's letter terms 'the only one,'" but it refuses to enforce dogma upon its members (1998:8). Jackson's statement reflects the residual sense of universality within the TS despite its rejection of dogma. Jackson then traces the Theosophical Society's abhorrence of doctrine and dogma to the TS's historical emphasis on "personal verification" (1998:9).

This notion of an implicit commonality to all religions may be considered a manifestation of the modernist project seeking universality and consensus. In turn, this manifestation is applied to premodern systems in the idea that traditional, premodern systems of belief contain universal elements. Because of its tendency towards universality, the TS demonstrates a stance towards the applicability of moral values that is more modern than premodern. The idea of an implicit commonality to all religions exhibits the drive towards moral universality, which is a goal of modernity.

Impracticality of Complete Consensus

The idea of an implicit consensus is something that may be believed by many members of the TS, but most members of the TS do not believe in the notion of complete consensus in practice. Because individuals come from such diverse backgrounds, because words often do not give justice to reality, and because of the TS's historical rejection of ideological imperialism, many members of the TS are hesitant to conceive of a complete consensus of ideology in practice. Samuel insisted that the function of dialogue is not to come to a consensus, but rather to come to an understanding of other people. To many members of the TS, the key is to discover that consensus on one's own with the help of respectful and open discussion with other people. The imposition of a consensus is avoided because of the possibility of that consensus being false. The

Theosophical Society endorses each individual's attempt to retain humility in a constant seeking after truth and value. According to Jackson,

The Theosophical Society's motto, 'There Is No Religion . . . Higher than Truth,' strips from the Theosophist any complacency in just accepting Theosophical doctrines on blind faith. It urges us to use our own enlightened judgement to test and prove Theosophy's truths for ourselves (1998:11)

Once a belief becomes externalized through words, it becomes like faith or religion, the imperial authority of which the Theosophical Society undermines through its constant study of religion, science, and philosophy.

John expressed this idea best:

there is a universal reality, but I can't say what it is . . . it seems there is a universal morality that is really for all people at all times—whether it can be explicated is another question . . . in the end, these are truths that transcend language.

He then gave a hypothetical example of different people who come to experience truth. According to him, one person may interpret this ultimate truth as Christ and another may interpret it as Kwan Yin because of their divergent backgrounds and worldviews. According to John, "*they're all going to put it in terms that they understand.*" Everything is a matter of individual interpretation, and because of the precariousness of language, the implicit consensus must be realized within oneself.

Some members of the Theosophical Society believe that reality cannot even be fully perceived and understood by human beings. Susan makes the following analogy between the human condition and Plato's Allegory of the Cave:

[W]e are in a way imprisoned in this body and mind. You know the story of the Cave, Plato's Cave? I mean, this is so true of our lives. I mean, we may not live in a cave, trained to see only the shadows, literally—but figuratively, I think we are. . . . When you think of the Plato's Cave and take away the exact image of the people being chained and seeing the shadows and so on, I think we are still in that position, vis a vis the entire big universe, in the sense that, in our limited form, being in this body and this mind, there are limitations . . . but there are things in the universe that we are not aware of, and we see only the shadows of those things.

According to some people in the TS, not only are the external language and knowledge structure inadequate in containing full truth, but also are human perception and cognition. For these reasons, any consensus that people establish amongst themselves is bound to fall short of full truth.

The emphasis on individual foundation for morality indicates a movement in a postmodern ethical direction. Many TS members adhere to the modern idea that universality is implicit, but they give this idea a postmodern treatment by additionally stating that this universality cannot be expressed in a practical consensus. Members of the Theosophical Society appear to problematize issues of foundation more than issues of universality. This results from the notion of the universal oneness, which functions to promote the idea of ethical universality.

Inner Self as Other

In his 2003 *Quest* article, “Theosophy, Biosophy, and Bioethics,” Michael Fox, a veterinarian, states his belief that “all creatures are in God and of God. . . . but we are not always aware of this because we do not feel and act as if we are part of the One Life” (2003:137). Fox

conceptualizes the relationship between the self and the universal oneness as something alienated from our everyday experience.

To deal with late modern issues of foundation and universality, many members of the Theosophical Society form a conception of a Self that is separate from the Self that is experienced everyday. This inner self is closer to the divine or the universal oneness than the culturally conditioned self and thus constitutes a possible moral foundation. Six members who were interviewed expressed this idea explicitly using terms like “*the real self*,” “*inner self*,” “deep within, the *best part of the self*,” “*higher self*,” and “*Higher levels of self*.” These terms were explained by the members to refer to a separation (however small) between the superficial self and the inner self. Other informants referred to the idea of an inner self without explicating it. I suggest that this Theosophical version of self-religiosity constitutes a transformation of a premodern concept. According to Heelas, “Self religiosity is . . . as ancient as the Upanishads, for instance; or, to take an example from the West, can be found in millenarian movements of the Middle Ages” (1993:110). The concept of a more divine Self higher than the self of everyday experience is not a new idea; however, members of the Theosophical Society treat this idea in new ways.

Theosophists in general have cast off structures of hierarchy and privilege. As Mr. Z. pointed out, not even the international president has real moral authority over an individual within the Society. In the worldview of the Theosophical Society, any individual has the opportunity to become what many Theosophists, including Jackson, call “lay chelas” (1998:11). A lay chela is an individual who has decided to enter a path to spiritual wisdom. Anybody is free to enter a spiritual path; anybody can seek wisdom for him or herself—and anybody can choose the methods by which enter that path. One lay chela may use the study of the *Bhagavad Gita* as her main source of inspiration, while another may use meditation and biblical scripture as his. The

particular details of one's spiritual path are not determined through tradition, as is often the case in many premodern traditions, but rather through individual discernment. This trend towards individuality in the determination of one's path may be attributed to the TS's late modern distrust of imposed structures.

In addition, a member does not have to believe in anything to enter a spiritual path; rather, a member of the TS needs only to be "sympathetic" to the three objects—and as Mr. Z noted, sympathy towards the first object is really necessary for membership in the Society. This individual freedom of belief is a far cry from many religious traditions, which set down basic beliefs that adherents must hold in order to progress spiritually.

This conceptualization of the Self as Other helps provide a sense of foundation *and* universality to a moral authority that is delegated only to the individual. In her 2003 article "The Urgency for a New Perspective," Radha Burnier, the international president of the Theosophical Society states,

[O]ne has to go deeply into oneself in order to negate all those values, ideas, and notions which, lying hidden within the mind, project the objects of desire and the many illusions to which we attach ourselves. To be a Theosophist means to be free, to learn to look intelligently, to find that state within oneself which is purity and austerity (2003:148)

Burnier prescribes an inward movement of the self in a denial of preconceived values. She advocates the discovery of a part of oneself that is allegedly not experienced in everyday life—in her words, "that state within oneself which is purity and austerity." This form of one's self is conceptualized as separate from the everyday self. Similarly, Fox discusses the "enlightened self" as something that begins as separate from everyday existence:

The enlightened self is the god of forgiveness in our own awareness, humility, compassion, and understanding. It is not external to our own being. This rediscovery of the Self is the way of Theosophy” (2003:137).

Fox’s statement indicates a beginning of the conceptualization of the self as other to the culturally conditioned self. In his interview, John stated that there are several levels of the self; this claim reflects an assertion Greg made in his interview that there exists a “*best part of self*” that lies “*deep within,*” is “*intuitive,*” and is “*at the very foundation of your being.*” Like John and Greg, several members of the Theosophical Society described a level of the self that is deeper than the superficial self that is experienced in day-to-day life.

In *A Program for Living the Spiritual Life* (1989), Nicholson discusses the separation between the spiritual self and the personality achieved by meditation. Meditation is one of the techniques she prescribes for developing one’s spiritual life. Mr. Z expressed the same opinion regarding meditation. According to him, meditation “*takes us to a higher source.*” He describes meditation as a way of shedding the culturally-conditioned, everyday self to get at the deeper inner self:

To me, our experience is in some way, an interconnection with—let me use a metaphor—the higher, the deeper, the divine, the empty, the void, the word in Buddhism used is sunyata, which is the emptiness, and Christian monastics use the word “gnosis,” which is a self-emptying. . . . In some ways, we’re assuming that the meditation aspect . . . takes us away from our ordinary persona, being, and identity, and it goes beyond the social security number . . . so we become something in connection with a consciousness that I think is beyond where our consciousness is. . . . The breathing in from a higher source is essential to the meditation part.

Many members of the Theosophical Society look at meditation this way. To them, meditation is a tool one can use to connect with the inner self, which in turn has a connection to a form of divine transcendence.

In his 1999 article, “Daily Life as Spiritual Practice,” Ravi Ravindra, a Professor of Physics, speaks from a worldview that holds the Hindu figure Krishna in reverence. According to Ravindra, the essence of Krishna is within everybody, and one must delve into an inner part of the self to reach Him. According to Ravindra, “Being mindful of our deepest self is a way to attend to the purpose of our Krishna” (1999:48). Expressed in this statement is a sense of a movement inward to a Self that lies deep within the everyday Self.

This notion of the inner Self as other is a premodern notion that has received a postmodern treatment in light of the late modern distrust of tradition. In the context of the Theosophical Society, there are no set structures or belief that one must have to come into contact with one’s inner Self; one has the freedom to choose a path of his or her own discernment. This idea constitutes a postmodern emphasis on individual discernment applied to the premodern idea of self-religiosity. Although individuals within the TS conceive of the self’s relation to the divine in different ways, many of them seem to bear a conception of the inner self as separate from the culturally conditioned self and as closer to the divine element and/or the universal harmony.

Foundation Situated within the Cosmic Harmony

Authority is not the only element comprising ethical foundation—it is only the practical element. There remains the question of a philosophical ethical foundation. In other words, on what grounds should one make one decision rather than another? Many members of the TS situate the moral foundation outside of the culturally-conditioned self, yet in contact with the inner self.

Further, many of them situate it within the universal oneness with which the inner self is in close contact. Universal oneness provides a foundation that often justifies the authority of the inner self.

In the interviews, two primary conceptions of the philosophical foundations of morality can be identified. The first was the stance that nothing is inherently good or evil, but forces that influence the cosmic harmony may prove to be positive or negative. Several informants who conceived of an amoral universe defined karma as that which maintains the cosmic harmony. The second conception of moral foundation is that there *is* such a thing as right and wrong, and that moral distinction *is* embedded in the universe. This perspective is quite similar to the first perspective—the major difference lies in the belief in an implicit right and wrong. These two categories of response are neither exhaustive nor conclusive; they are merely the two main alternatives expressed by interviewed members of the Theosophical Society. In fact, some informants could not decide whether or not they believe in an implicit right or wrong. This non-committal attitude reflects the idea that the individual does not have all the answers and is therefore on a constant search.

The members of the Theosophical Society who subscribe to the first perspective do not actively agree with the notion of goodness and evil; instead, they posit an amoral universe that is unified in such a way that any “disruption” within the universe must be corrected. This notion is almost always connected with the notion of karma. Through karma, people become more aware of the consequences of their actions. These members grounded morality in the concept of the universal harmony, but refused to ground it further in the notion of implicit right and wrong.

Karma plays an important role in many members’ conceptions of ethical foundations. To them, karma is not a force that exacts sin and punishment as payback for evil deeds, but rather an impersonal compulsion that maintains harmony in the universe. Susan, a member who appears to subscribe to the first perspective of philosophical foundation, explained karma as follows:

[E]ach action produces a reaction. Some people have compared it to a giant net, and if you pull on the net, then other portions of the net are also moved. That reaches right into the theory of karma . . . If the harmony is disturbed, then something has to happen to get the universe back into harmony. . . . It's not a punishment; karma has no feeling. In the law of karma, if you disturb the harmony—somewhere—the harmony has to be restored, not necessarily by you. So it's impersonal, and probably amoral. . . . The only goal is that the universe should be in harmony.

According to Susan, karma operates to balance the harmony of diverse forces operating on the universe. It is not an ethical force, but rather a maintaining force.

Many of the Theosophists who expressed the belief in an amoral karma expressed the idea that at least part of our moral orientation derives from cultural conditioning. Only a few members asserted that the human sense of morality is completely immanent instead of transcendent; most of the members interviewed expressed the sense that morality is partly transcendent and partly immanent. Frank, a member of the TS in his fifties, took a different approach to the question of the origin of morality.

Frank asserted that the motivation for all human action was the desire for happiness. He made the distinction between temporary happiness and lasting happiness. According to Frank, temporary happiness is situated on the “physical, mental, or astral plane,” and often ultimately causes pain because of its temporary nature.

For Frank, karma is a “*balancing out*” of human actions. He gave the hypothetical example of a woman under oppressive misogynist laws and presented the possibility that, in a previous life, this woman may have been a man who had made those oppressive laws. She may try to change these laws now because she finally knows what it is like to suffer oppression. He

does not use this hypothetical situation as a justification of institutional oppression; in fact, he states, *“one good thing about the society that you’re born into, whatever they consider moral, you go along with it, but try to change it at the same time.”* Social laws are always changeable. The constant changing of laws is an indication that we’re still learning how to live in harmony with each other. According to Frank, *“If we’re hostile and abuse people, then it’s going to come back to us and we’re going to know what that feels like. If you make people powerless and hold them down, then that’s going to come back to us.”* Thus, a function of karma is not retribution, but education.

Other members of the TS conceive the world as a field for learning, as a form of experiential schooling for the spirit. Samuel conceives of karma not as a system of retribution, but rather as a way by which individual can come to realize the consequences of their own actions:

What you do unto life, life will do back unto you, with the qualification that it is not a revenge mechanism, but it’s for you to learn, to become sensitive, to be on the receiving end of your own actions. But what you receive in this life is not indicative of what you’ve done in this life. What you receive now might have been the effects of previous lives.

In this statement, Samuel mirrors Frank’s sentiment: that karma does not bear the concept of right and wrong within itself, but rather is a way by which people can learn the ramifications of their own actions.

Most members of the Theosophical Society, whether they subscribe to the first perspective or to the second, renounce the idea of sin and punishment. In his 2003 *Quest* article “Theosophy, Biosophy, and Bioethics,” Michael Fox, discusses the concept of sin and punishment:

Theosophy . . . does not offer to save our souls from sin and punishment like some Christian, Islamic, or other fundamentalist cult. Rather, it views so-called sin and

punishment as disturbances of cosmic harmony and the inevitable restitution of harmony in their wake. Theosophy gives no other coloration (136).

The cosmic harmony knows nothing of retribution for sin. Humans deem things to be right and wrong depending on how their actions affect the universe.

John Algeo, a past president of the Theosophical Society, provides a loose definition for good and evil in his *Theosophy: An Introductory Study Course*: “No one and nothing is inherently evil. There is no absolute evil, but only relative evil in the world” (2003:63). He continues: “Good is all that works in harmony with the development of the universe; evil is that which works against it” (2003:64). Algeo also claims, “Evil, like good, does not exist in and by itself, but only in relation to its opposite and to its context” (2003:64). In these statements, Algeo neutralizes evil; evil is made relative to good in its consequences.

The second approach to the philosophical ethical foundation finds moral distinctions to be implicit in the harmony human beings can perceive in nature. Although the original teachings of Blavatsky conceived of a harmonized universe without moral standing, some members see an inherent goodness in nature, or even the existence of a law of morality embedded in nature. In his *Quest* article, Klaus Klostermaier uses diverse sources from philosophy, science, and religion to form a cohesive theory of morality and nature. He declares that principles of morality are inherent in reality itself: our knowledge of our specifically human nature, our ethics, and the recognition of laws of right behavior are based upon a dimension of reality itself and not just upon conventions (1998:38). According to Klostermaier, “Moral conscience is as natural a part of consciousness as consciousness is a part of nature” (1998:40). Klostermaier then proceeds to make a law embedded in nature as the foundation of morality: “In analogy to the physical laws of nature . . . the moral laws of nature serve as protection against hubris and overbearance and provide a non-negotiable basis for societies” (1998:38). Although he considers human knowledge of nature to

be ambiguous, he considers moral law discovered in nature as authoritative over the conventions of culturally conditioned societies.

In *A Program for Living the Spiritual Life*, Shirley Nicholson discusses a possible foundation for morality within the harmony in which humans live:

For as the individual has voice, so has that in which the individual exists. Life itself has speech and is never silent. And its utterance is not, as you that are deaf may suppose, a cry: it is a song. Learn from it that you are part of the harmony; learn from it to obey the laws of the harmony (1989:11).

Like Klostermaier, Nicholson posits that there are laws inherent in the universal harmony, in contrast to the other perspective, which situates moral foundation not in a pre-set law embedded in nature, but in a perpetual balancing act of karma.

Clare, a somewhat marginal member of the Theosophical Society, also suggested that law embedded in nature is a foundation for morality: “*I take nature to be a guide for me . . . the laws of nature.*” She then showed some pictures of her two cats:

[T]hey teach me about life on a daily basis. So, watching nature, and seeing how nature does it, and what's OK and what isn't OK, or watching birds fly, or watching them nest, or beavers building a dam, or the hierarchy in the geese flying across the sky how they fly and how one takes the head position. How animals interact with each other—who yields and who has the lead, that kind of thing. . . . a lot of that stems from a natural source.

Mr Z., a highly involved member of the TS, believes that “the light coming through us is such that goodness is inherent . . . the higher law comes through the heart, not through anything that's the word of law.” Like others, Mr. Z expresses the belief in a higher law manifest within the divine element in all people. For him, morality is “not in thou shalts,” but rather in sensitization to

others. When people become more sensitive to other people as well as to the universal oneness, they get a better sense of the law embedded in nature.

Whether they believe in the existence of a natural moral law embedded in the universe or in an amoral karma maintaining harmony in the precarious balance of the universe, most informants located an ethical foundation in a force outside of themselves. The idea of a law embedded in nature is deeply premodern, as is the notion of karma. However, the treatment of these traditions is influenced by late modern destabilization of established systems. Since neither laws embedded in nature nor consequences nor the necessary consequences of karma may be conveyed through language or fixed structures of knowledge, legislative ethical foundation is placed upon the individual—as mentioned before, this is a postmodern development. While practical moral authority is situated within the individual, philosophical moral foundation is situated within the harmony of the universe. This philosophical moral foundation lends stability to the instable authority of the individual. The TS members' treatment of the idea that the individual has self-legislative authority is not completely postmodern because of the metanarrative surrounding the philosophical grounds for ethical foundation. That metanarrative reflects the value that the modern ethical project placed upon stable universality and foundation. Theosophy as it is practiced by many of the informants appropriates a premodern philosophical foundation to lend stability to its postmodern stance towards individual authority.

CONCLUSIONS

The Theosophical Society, despite some of its rhetoric against modern constructs, may be considered a product of the modernist project—if not a rebelling product. In its rebellion against modernity, it has exhibited a turn towards premodern traditions, which are grounded in their cultural and historical longevity. In his discussion of the New Age Movement, Heelas states, “It

would appear that the new relies on the old, for ‘wisdom,’ practice, and—the academic might add—legitimization” (1993:109). I would suggest that this new turn towards old traditions is heavily influenced by the modern project’s insistence on the legitimization of meta-narratives—be it through science or philosophy. Many of those in the Theosophical Society, after rejecting the absolutist authority of science and philosophy, have turned to religion as an additional means of understanding the world. In a gesture against the modern authority of science and reason, many members of the Theosophical Society incorporate old religious traditions in their worldviews.

The following table illustrates the preceding analysis of the nine common themes identified among members of the Theosophical Society.

Table 2. Analysis of Common Ethical Themes

Common Theme	Analysis
Unity of All Things	Premodern
Union of Fact and Value	Premodern and Postmodern
Non-transparency of Language and Structure	Postmodern
Legislative Authority of the Self	Postmodern
Constant Search	Postmodern
Implicit Universal Consensus	Modern
Impracticality of Complete Consensus	Postmodern treatment of a modern idea
Inner Self as Other	Postmodern treatment of a premodern concept in light of late modernity
Foundation situated within the cosmic harmony	Postmodern treatment of a modern idea with the use of premodern justifications

The ethics of the TS differs from premodern and modern ethics in that legislative authority is placed upon the individual, and not upon prescribed experts. While, according to Bauman, the modernist project sought practical consensus through complex systems of science and reason, members of the TS seem to seek an implicit consensus through common experiences and commonalities in religion, philosophy, and religion. The ethics apparent in the TS also exhibits a postmodern influence in the TS’s attitude towards language and structure. The TS’s abandonment

of the imperial forces of religion, science, and philosophy has resulted in a rejection of the absolute authority of any structure of knowledge.

This peculiar mixture of premodern, modern, and postmodern ethics indicates that many members of the Theosophical Society use a wide breadth of resources in their response to the ethical problems of late modernity. They began from an American social milieu that generally claims modern values for its participants, and branched out to other forms of thought in the face of the late 20th century destabilization of morality. In the framework of the Theosophical Society, they found premodern ways to deal with this destabilization. However, since they had a background of modern values, they could utilize postmodern ideas only in the context of modernity.

Many of the common ideas held by members of the Theosophical Society resonate with the postmodern ethics of Gianni Vattimo. As mentioned previously, Vattimo believes that traditions and metanarratives might be used to impose order on one's perception of the world, but that these constructs of knowledge must always be viewed as provisional and unstable. For Vattimo, emphasis on constant understanding and interpreting acts as a check against either the complete skepticism of strong nihilism or the deconstructible false certainty of the metanarrative (Rose 2000). Despite his postmodern thought, Vattimo appears to believe in a truth, but in a truth that may not be completely understood nor effectively conveyed. Likewise, many members of the Theosophical Society who were interviewed believed that there would be this constant search for truth and value in the midst of culturally conditioned interpretation. Although in their eyes truth does exist, it must not be dominated by metanarrative. In this manner, members of the Theosophical Society have expressed ideas similar to those expressed in the academic venture of postmodern ethics.

This study of the Theosophical Society in America sheds light on some possible responses to Zygmunt Bauman's problems of universality and foundation. The members of the Theosophical Society were placed in an advantageous situation in light of the failure of the late modern project—due to their membership in the Society, they were encouraged to use the resources of religion, philosophy, and science to reconstruct an ethical worldview. This they did, and they were able to reconstruct a worldview that incorporates premodern, modern, and postmodern ideas. There remains the question of why elements of postmodern ethics came to be discovered in the course of interviews with members of the Theosophical Society. The purely exploratory nature of this study refrained from addressing this question; however, this question would be a fit subject for further research. Notwithstanding, the findings in this study reveal that the purely postmodern approach to ethics is not the only possible approach to the failure of universality and foundation in ethics, and that pre-modern, modern, and postmodern approaches to ethics could be used effectively.

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