

THE SURVIVAL OF THE PERSONALITY, ACCORDING TO MODERN ESOTERIC TEACHINGS

Joscelyn GODWIN

In this essay I shall review some teachings concerning life after death by well-known figures who have either assumed the mantle of initiatic wisdom, or have had it attributed to them by their followers. The reader may decide whether the results bear out the claims of esotericism to attain a level of certainty superior to the conflicting opinions of exoteric religionists and profane philosophers.

There are two complementary approaches to the question of survival. One is the bird's eye view of the quasi-omniscient authority, who situates the human being and its personality within a cosmic context. The other is what one might call the worm's eye view: the perspective of the personality itself, as it lived on earth and passes through the gates of death. It was the latter view that prevailed during the rise of Modern Spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century, and not surprisingly, since the sources of information declared that they were the personalities of individual men and women. The success of Spiritualism, as a religion and as a social movement, hinged on the plausibility of these personalities and their recognition by the living witnesses. The issue of self-deception is irrelevant here; communications did take place, and what was communicated by the mediums during innumerable séances suggested strongly that humans carry their earthly personalities into the post-mortem state. Christianity had taught this for centuries, but it had erected a barrier between our world and the next that could only be broached in the rarest of circumstances, for instance by saints; otherwise what transpired on the other side was a subject for imaginative speculation by artists, poets and preachers. The great claim of Spiritualism was that it had penetrated this barrier. By purporting to open a "spiritual telegraph" to the next world, it could happily dispense with church hierarchies, and with biblical authority except as corroboration for its own revelations.

Spiritualism was a child of its time, and grew in symbiosis with the socialistic currents of the nineteenth century. It was no mere chance that it

seized the attention of the public in the New World (whereas phenomena of the kind had long been documented in Europe), nor that it appealed to the fighters for women's rights, workers' unionization, and the abolition of slavery. It was a democratic religion that revealed a democratic otherworld closely resembling an "improved" version of our own, in which all those spirits who so chose might go forward on the path of progress. The matter of choice was important, for in Spiritualism, death did not seal the person's ultimate destiny, as it does in traditional Christian doctrine. While expiating past sins, if need be, the spirit was able to continue exercising free will, and to evolve by its own efforts toward a state of ultimate perfection.

So much for the general doctrinal outlines on which almost all Spiritualists agreed. However, the exact nature of this spirit, which so resembled the earthly personality, was not well defined until later in the century, when experimental scientists took an interest in the phenomena of the séance room. It was in particular the experiments of Colonel Eugène-Auguste de Rochas in the 1890s that led to some tentative conclusions¹. Rochas was not as interested in purported communications from the dead as he was in the capacities of a magnetized (or hypnotized) medium to enter a somnambulistic state and, under instruction, to explore extra-corporeal dimensions and to demonstrate phenomenal powers of telepathy and clairvoyance. If a few gifted mediums were capable of such out-of-the-body activities and experiences while living, might this not be a harbinger of what awaits everyone after death? These were the conclusions of Carl du Prel, who reflected as follows on Rochas's experiments:

Rochas's experiments have proved that an inner core of being may separate itself from the living man and live on, feeling and thinking. From this we must first conclude that death also causes the separation of the astral body from the material body. [...] The astral body exteriorized in death, however, can not only make use of its magical capacities, as in its lifetime, but can do so much more easily and productively than it did when alive. Thus spiritualist phenomena are a priori much likelier than the magical phenomena of somnambulism, which are only denied by those who know nothing about them. The only thing open to doubt would be whether the dead would want to make use of these more facile magical capabilities. But one can scarcely doubt their wish to do so. It would be most arbitrary to assume that death sunders all the psychic threads by which we hang onto the world. It certainly alters the form of our perceptions and our manner of action, and makes them magical; but it certainly does not alter our psychic substance: that would contravene the Law of the Conservation of Energy².

¹ E.-A. de Rochas [d'Aiglun], *L'Extériorisation de la sensibilité*, Paris 1895.

² Carl du Prel, *Der Tod. Das Jenseits. Das Leben im Jenseits*, Jena 1901, 115.

Here we have the concept of the personality as a "psychic substance" or "astral body" that survives death and which, once released from the physical body, is more able to exercise its "magical" powers — which might include communication with the living. As Charles Lancelin, another follower of Rochas, puts it, with a typical allusion to evolution:

For us who have experimented, it is undeniable that the process of death is exactly the same as that of magnetic sleep, and that it is characterized in the same fashion as the latter: by a splitting of the being into its material principles, which remain on the physical plane, and its immaterial and spiritual principles, which go on to evolve on a higher plane³.

The empirical methods of the Spiritualists and the scientists encouraged them in their optimistic hope for an afterlife of progress in something resembling our present personalities, only finer in both a substantial and a moral sense. Needless to say, the dicta of the "spirits" themselves supported this belief, and often went much further by volunteering information of a cosmic nature, via what are nowadays called "channeled" communications, transmitted by mediums in apparent ignorance of what they were writing or speaking about.

There is a fine line to be drawn between inspired writing of this kind and the more conscious process, sometimes called initiation, by which esotericists, if they are not merely dependent on tradition, come by their convictions. From this borderland between mediumship and initiation there arose, in the last third of the nineteenth century, the movement identified by John Patrick Deveney, in his study of the life and work of Paschal Beverly Randolph. Deveney gathers the evidence for a concerted effort to propagate a theory of man's origin and destiny at a more sophisticated level than that of common Spiritualism. He traces it in the works of Randolph, in the books written by Emma Hardinge Britten and in those published under her editorship (*Ghostland* and *Art Magic*), in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky up to *Isis Unveiled* (1877), and in the teachings of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. Common to all of these is a myth of cosmic anthropogenesis, as distinct from the "fiat" creation of monotheism. It begins with the central sun radiating out a host of monads, which make a vast journey of trans-migrations through a myriad of forms, including birth and individuality in the human state, until they eventually return to their origin. The human state consists of a triad of spirit, soul, and body. The spirit is the deathless monad that came from the sun. The soul, or astral body, is made from

³ Charles Lancelin, *La vie posthume. Recherches expérimentales d'après les plus récentes données de la physique, de la psycho-physiologie et de la psychologie expérimentale*, Paris 1922, 55.

ethereal matter. It can become immortal by joining the spirit's journey, preserving its individuality for ages until it is totally free from matter and external form, and returning to the sun. However, if it is too materially minded, the soul loses contact with the spirit and roams the earth until it dissolves⁴. The human state is therefore the crucial pinnacle of the monad's transmigrations, from which the soul either goes on to glory, or dies⁵.

Whereas the Spiritualists, like most Christians of their time, had divided the human being into body and spirit (sometimes calling the latter soul), the more esoteric or "occultist" teaching outlined above restored the tripartite man of Platonic and earlier Christian theology. The spirit or monad, so viewed, is ever-perfect, untouched by its transmigratory adventures. The drama is played out in the intermediate soul-region, where the fate of the human personality is determined: either to join with its immortal spirit, or to dissolve away in a state resembling the dreary Hades of classical mythology. For this branch of esoteric teaching, the survival of the personality after death is not assured, but is contingent on the direction and degree of its orientation during its lifetime.

The decades around the turn of the twentieth century saw many attempts to elaborate on this basic scheme, mainly by increasing the number of elements in the human being to four, seven, or nine, and by analyzing the constitution and destiny of each. I turn now to some of the four-part systems, beginning with the "Philosophie cosmique" developed by Max Théon (1848?-1927) after his collaboration with the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor during the 1880s. Théon's philosophy does not follow the Spiritualist dichotomy of matter and spirit, but, true to its "cosmic" nature, states that everything is material. As Christian Chanel summarizes Théon's teachings on the subject, the human being has four bodies, made from various states of matter that derive from corresponding regions of the earth. These bodies are as follows, with their correlations⁶:

- 4. Mental body = spirit
- 3. Psychic body = (intellectual) soul

⁴ John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph. A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician*, Albany 1997, 277-278. See also, on the present subject, Deveney's *Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society* (Theosophical History Occasional Papers VI), Fullerton 1997.

⁵ Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 280.

⁶ Christian Chanel, 'De la "Fraternité Hermétique de Louxor" au "Mouvement Cosmique": l'Œuvre de Max Théon. Contribution à l'étude des courants ésotériques en Europe à la fin du XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle.' Doctorat d'Etat, École Pratique des hautes Études, V^{ème} Section: Sciences Religieuses (Paris, Sorbonne), 1994, 682.

2. Nervous body = astral body

1. Physical body

The lower two bodies (1 and 2) are subject to disorder, while the upper two are balanced, and the Mental body, at least, is immortal. Théon conceived of each body as potentially becoming fixed, and thus serving as a kind of mold in which the next higher body could be developed. The after-death state depends on the degree of progress that the person has made during life. In his earlier writings Théon was pessimistic about anyone's chances of achieving union with the Mental body or spirit: it was work enough, he thought, to bring the Nervous body under the control of reason, thus beginning the process of individuation, but the longer the earth life, the better chance one had of going further⁷. In later writings he allowed that there are three possibilities. [A] The rare cases who are fully individualized go on from light to light. (Théon mentions three additional kinds of materiality above the four mentioned, called Spirit, Light and Essence, which he says humanity ought to possess but, by implication, does not⁸. Possibly he imagined the progress of the fully individualized as involving these.) [B] Good people who have made some progress may rest, then find new opportunities to evolve their nervous bodies. Only rarely does this involve reincarnation, for there is plenty of opportunity for growth with the higher bodies alone. [C] Those who die without achieving individuation become wandering entities, obsessed with reflections of scenes that impressed them in their lifetimes⁹.

There is a close correlation between Théon's four-part division of man and that of his contemporary Giuliano Kremmerz (1861-1930). In his *Dialoghi sull'Ermetismo*, Kremmerz also analyzes the human being as comprising four bodies, each being a sublimation from the one beneath¹⁰:

- 4. Solar body — intellectual, luminous principle, participating in universal life
- 3. Mercurial body — individual, mental man, seat of intellect and will
- 2. Lunar body — seat of feelings, sensations, imagination
- 1. Saturnine body — the physical organism¹¹

Kremmerz envisages three possible fates following death, which also resemble Théon's three cases. [A] There are those who pass voluntarily from one

⁷ *Ibid.*, 689.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 684.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 695.

¹⁰ Giuliano Kremmerz, *Dialoghi sull'Ermetismo*, Milan 1948, 58.

¹¹ Descriptions of the four bodies from Giuliano Kremmerz, *Opera Omnia* III, Rome 1954, viii.

existence to another, preserving uninterrupted consciousness of their essence; they are virtually immortal. [B] The most numerous group, comprising average humanity, survives and is gradually brought to maturity through repeated reincarnations. [C] Those who have subordinated the higher bodies entirely to the lower suffer the law of the latter, in the decomposition of their psycho-physical unity¹². Kremmerz was much more optimistic than Théon about the possibility of achieving immortality, and the teaching of his esoteric school, the *Fratellanza Terapeutico-Magica di Myriam*, beside healing, was directed to this end.

Whereas for Théon and the Spiritualists, the impulse to continue in a new life (whether reincarnated on earth or in other states) comes from the higher bodies, Kremmerz suggests that it comes from below. Although it was not his style to teach dogmatically, he poses the suggestive question: "What if, instead of a soul (as the action of vitality in the human breath is popularly understood) there were a seed, an embryo, a mysterious atom that contained all the experience of the past life; and what if this germ, in order to preserve its virtue, were to attach itself before fertilization to a living material from which it could be nourished?"¹³ Mindful of the Pythagorean tradition of metempsychosis into non-human bodies, Kremmerz goes on to say that this could be an animal.

Historical questions of influence and precedence would require a fuller study than this sketch. These parallels and the ones that follow may or may not imply contact or the transmission of ideas. It is sufficient here to indicate, as Mr. Deveney has done in the case of Randolph and his contemporaries, a common doctrinal ground between certain important esotericists. In that spirit, I move on to the system of George I. Gurdjieff (1866-1949), which also belongs in this company.

Gurdjieff's analysis of the human being, as given in Saint Petersburg during World War I and recorded by P. D. Ouspensky, is another example of "cosmic materialism". The physical body, said Gurdjieff in these lectures, is so complex that it already contains all the functions necessary for life: a man can live quite adequately with it alone, and "may even produce the impression of being a very intellectual or even *spiritual* man, and may deceive not only others but himself"¹⁴. (I note in passing that this view of the physical body agrees perfectly with that of scientific materialism.) But under certain conditions a new, independent organism can

¹² *Ibid.* and *Opera Omnia* II, 39.

¹³ Kremmerz, *Dialoghi*, 50.

¹⁴ P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous. Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, London 1950, 41.

grow from the physical body, then a third and a fourth, each one controlling its predecessors. This results in the same fourfold scheme as our other philosophers:

4. Divine body = causal
3. Spiritual body = mental
2. Natural body = astral
1. Carnal body = physical

In his late work *All and Everything* (also known as *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*), Gurdjieff takes the bird's eye view and explains the four bodies in a cosmic, evolutionary context. The physical bodies of humanity evolved with the earth. Then, by the will of the Father, they became coated with a second body, the "body Kesdjan", made from substances from the sun and the other planets. Next, they began to absorb cosmic substances and gained "higher being-bodies". Lastly these got the possibility of unity with the "Cause-of-Causes, the Most Most Holy Sun Absolute"¹⁵.

As for the destiny of the individual, there is no survival for the man who dies with only a physical body; in Gurdjieff's memorable phrase, "Everything living on the earth, people, animals, plants, is food for the Moon"¹⁶. (This would correlate to case C in the previous schemes.) The higher bodies alone have the potential for future life and immortality, and they can only be crystallized through hard inner work. Thus after death the planetary body decomposes back to the earth. The second body, made from solar and other planetary radiations, returns to its origins. The third body can never decompose, but must persist in this solar system until it can become an independent individual with its own "Reason". This is done by seeking another two-natured vehicle to enter, in what is called metempsychosis or reincarnation. (That would be case B.) When it has perfected Reason, it is taken to the "Sun Absolute" to ply its destined role (case A)¹⁷.

The seeming contradiction between the two versions of Gurdjieff's system may be the result of looking at the problem of survival from the worm's or the bird's perspective. As presented in the early lectures, man — regarded as the earthly personality — has no chance of survival unless he has done inner work to acquire one or more of his higher bodies. In the cosmology of *All and Everything* the higher bodies are all present, but if they are uncrystallized through the man's own effort, the two lower bodies are reabsorbed into the substances from which they were made, while the higher ones may

¹⁵ G. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything*, London 1950, 763-765.

¹⁶ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 765-769.

transmigrate into fresh two-bodied beings that have nothing to do with him. His personality has been extinguished for ever.

The work of René Schwaller de Lubicz (1887-1961) has distinct resonances with the teachings of Théon, Kremmerz and Gurdjieff. For instance, Schwaller laid great emphasis on the matter of "crystallization" through conscious experience, and on the formation thereby of a "fixed salt" that would embody the essence of one's life and form the kernel for subsequent lives¹⁸. Like all the thinkers mentioned, he saw man as having a purpose within the cosmic economy, but one that could only be realized through individual effort. As Schwaller says, echoing Théon and Gurdjieff, "Man's aim is uniquely to go beyond mortal man in order to enter into cosmic man"¹⁹. If he fails in this lifetime, his components return to their origins to be recycled: "The subtle part which separates from the individual at death naturally seeks its supporting point in order to take form again, but if it has retained a regret or a violent desire, this will cause it to seek any substance whatsoever, psychic in particular, borrowed from a living being, in order to return to a ghostlike shadow-existence"²⁰. This seems to cover the three options that are now familiar from the other authorities: [A] Cosmic transcendence of the human state; [B] reincarnation of the subtle residue; [C] a vampiric or Hades-like state leading to permanent extinction of the personality.

Those familiar with the speculations of Buddhism concerning survival will notice how closely these esoteric schemes resemble them. Julius Evola (1898-1974), as a member of the "Gruppo di Ur", worked toward a synthesis of the magical traditions of the West with those of the East, especially Tantra, Taoism, and Buddhism. In his review of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Evola wrote a concise summary of the doctrine that he saw as being common to both sides:

It is known, following esoteric teaching, that death represents a deep crisis for the great mass of mankind. The change of state is accompanied by a kind of swoon or faint, which is only survived by a residual and automatic psychic form. The blind, fatal action of "causes" cultivated during earthly life now intervenes and surges up to determine the character, form, and birth of another being unconnected to the first one by any continuity of personal consciousness... We would add that the condition for mere survival, to say

¹⁸ R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, *Sacred Science. The King of Pharaonic Theocracy*, tr. André & Goldian VandenBroeck, New York 1982, 211. See also André VandenBroeck, *Al-Kemi. Hermetic, Occult, Political, and Private Aspects of R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz*, Great Barrington 1987, 174, 181, 220-223, which records conversations with Schwaller on these topics.

¹⁹ Schwaller, *Sacred Science*, 212.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

nothing of immortality, is to achieve while still alive a disconnection of consciousness, transferring and *fixing* it in a state independent of bodily conditions (psychological, physiological, and physical). This is more or less synonymous with initiation, or with a grade of yogic realization²¹.

Here and in his other essays for *Ur*, Evola was fully in agreement with what I have extracted from the other philosophers as posthumous options A, B, and C. Impatient of the average person's hope for life everlasting, he wrote: "The idea that everyone possesses an 'immortal soul', conceived as a facsimile of the living consciousness and of the individual earthly ego, is a real ideological aberration, even though its usefulness as an opiate for the masses is sometimes indisputable. What is capable of surviving, and immortal, is not the 'anima' but the mind as *nous*, as the supra-natural element.[...] The 'anima' can only survive when it is joined to the 'mens' [...] In that way a new form is constituted which is not affected by death"²². But most people, he says, have not developed this: "...the *individuality* of the great mass of mankind is a sham, for their very unity is merely the fictitious and precarious one of a simple aggregation of forces and influences, which in no way can be considered as belonging to them"²³. Like Gurdjieff, Evola consigned most of humanity to the dustheap of option C.

I turn now briefly to the Theosophy of H. P. Blavatsky, with which all the esotericists so far mentioned were presumably familiar. A new cosmology and anthropology emerged after her arrival in India in 1878, beginning with the teachings of the Mahatmas Koot Hoomi and Morya, which were delivered in 1880-84 in correspondence with Blavatsky's supporters A. P. Sinnett and A. O. Hume. The copious writings of Blavatsky and later Theosophists, especially C. W. Leadbeater and Alice A. Bailey, play variations on these themes, whilst those of Rudolf Steiner and Papus presume to correct them, though still agreeing with most of their principles. Here I shall only treat the original model from the *Mahatma Letters*.

The Mahatmas' scheme, as far as it is relevant here, presents man as a sevenfold compound²⁴:

7. Atman — seat of eternal life power
6. Buddhi — spiritual soul

²¹ Ea [i.e. Julius Evola], 'La coscienza iniziatica nell'oltretomba', in: Gruppo di Ur, *Introduzione alla magia quale scienza dell'Io*, II, Genoa 1987, 134-146; here 135.

²² Ea, 'Il problema dell'immortalità', *ibid.*, I, 164-172; here 172.

²³ Ea, 'La dottrina del "corpo immortale"', *ibid.*, I, 223-232; here 227.

²⁴ Compiled from *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. and K. H.* transcribed, compiled, and with an Introduction by A. T. Barker, New York 1924, 70-78 (Letter XII from M.), 88-99 (Letter XV from K. H. to A. O. Hume), 99-116 (Letter XVI from K. H. to Sinnett), 127-134 (Letter XX-c from K. H. to Sinnett).

These constitute the eternal, imperishable, but also unconscious Monad, or spiritual individuality.

5. Manas — animal soul or physical intelligence

4. Kama rupa — center of energy, volition, will in earthly life

3. Jivatma — life principle

The whole individuality is centred in the above three principles.

2. Linga shariram — fluidic double

1. Physical or gross body

Writing about what happens to these seven principles at physical death, Mahatma M. (Morya) draws on the Sanskrit language, so rich in terms for the discussion of subtleties that have no equivalents in European languages:

[T]he *body* of man is wedded to and remains for ever within the body of his planet; his individual *jivatma* life principle, that which is called in physiology *animal spirits* returns after death to its source — *Fohat*; his *linga shariram* will be drawn into *Akasa*; his *Kamarupa* will recommingle with the Universal *Sakti* — the Will-Force, or universal energy; his “animal soul” borrowed from the breath of *Universal Mind* will return to the Dhyani Chohans; his sixth principle — whether drawn into or ejected from the matrix of the Great Passive Principle must remain in its own sphere — either as part of the crude material or as an individualized entity to be reborn in a higher world of causes. The seventh will carry it from the *Devachan* and follow the new *Ego* to its place of re-birth²⁵.

It seems that all the principles dissolve back into their separate sources except 6 and 7, and that in consequence the personality is lost for ever. That would indeed parallel the several schemes outlined so far, in which total extinction of the personality [compare what we have called case C] is one of the three possibilities post mortem. However, Mahatma K. H. (Koot Hoomi) writes, in the same series of letters, of how the 6th principle can acquire a conscious existence in the after-death state [case B], on condition that by the time of death there is something of worth in the 5th principle — “its nobler affections, its saintly (though they be *earthly*) aspirations, and the most Spiritualised portions of its mind”²⁶ — to be assimilated by it. Then the upper two principles enjoy a period of blissful reminiscence in the state called *Devachan*, until they descend again into incarnation. Koot Hoomi also mentions a third possibility: that of “pan-aeonian immortality” [case A], where consciousness and self-perception are uninterrupted, and the being remains the same in his Ego through births and deaths²⁷.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.