

Later Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers on Mind and its Place in the World

Running Head (RH): Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers on Mind

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Abstract:

In this paper I advance our knowledge about women's contributions to nineteenth-century British philosophy by setting out the views of mind of four later-century women: Frances Power Cobbe, Constance Naden, and the Theosophists Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. Cobbe espoused dualism, Naden materialism, and Blavatsky and Besant a form of panpsychism. Each woman's view was bound up with her position on religion and immortality, and each has problems as well as interesting features and understandable intellectual motivations. My aim is to help to restore these women to the historical record by reconstructing their views of the mind clearly and exploring the relations between them.

Keywords: Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky, Frances Power Cobbe, materialism, mind, Constance Naden, nineteenth-century philosophy, women in history of philosophy

Introduction

This paper sets out the views of the mind of four later nineteenth-century philosophical women—Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904), Constance Naden (1858–89), and the Theosophists and close intellectual co-workers Helena Blavatsky (1831–91) and Annie

Besant (1847–1933)—all based in Britain when they published the writings discussed here. It is illuminating to compare and contrast their views for several reasons. First, their views are diametrically opposed: Cobbe espouses dualism, Naden espouses materialism, and Blavatsky and Besant espouse panpsychism, in highly distinctive versions in each case. Second, Naden reacted against Cobbe-style dualism and the Theosophists in turn reacted against Naden’s materialism, so that the succession of their views exhibits an interesting dynamic. As materialism ousts dualism, the full burden of explaining mental phenomena falls onto the brain and body; but this throws up an explanatory gap that seems uncrossable given materialist assumptions, motivating panpsychism. Third, by comparing these women’s views we can see how they engaged with one another, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. This is important, fourth, because as part of restoring women philosophers to the historical record we need to reconstruct the intellectual relations amongst them—negative, critical relations as well as positive affiliations.

Scholarship on women’s contributions to nineteenth-century philosophy remains very limited, unlike with the early modern period. Women’s contributions to nineteenth-century philosophy of mind are neglected, and there have been no in-depth critical accounts of Cobbe’s or Naden’s theories of mind or how philosophical considerations regarding the mind help to motivate Blavatsky’s and Besant’s Theosophy. This is what I provide here, while also highlighting ways in which these four women’s views of mind were formed in response to one another, and within fields of debate that the other women helped to shape.¹ I shall refrain from mapping their views onto current debates in philosophy of mind, since we learn more from these women by letting them speak in their own voices and in the conceptual vocabularies of their own time and place. I further explain my framework and reasons for approaching these women together in Section 1. Then Sections 2, 3, and 4 are respectively on

Cobbe, Naden, and the Theosophists, and Section 5 draws out my conclusions about the comparative relations between their opposed positions.

1. Approaching Women in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy

My starting-point is Eileen O'Neill's insight—foundational for so much recent work on women in the history of philosophy—that women were philosophically active in past historical periods. Philosophical women *were* there, but what they said has become invisible; they wrote in “disappearing ink.”² O'Neill's focus was the early modern period, and a host of early modern women philosophers have now been rediscovered. But as yet very few historians of philosophy have looked at nineteenth-century women. This partly reflects the relative neglect of nineteenth-century British philosophy overall;³ but it also reflects particular institutional challenges that intellectual women then faced. They were fighting for basic civil and political rights, including for university education; but just as universities gradually opened up to women in the last quarter-century, philosophy began to organize itself as a specialist discipline, effectively moving the goalposts back again. Consider two sets of dates. Women became eligible to take University of London General Examinations in 1868, Girton College Cambridge was founded in 1869, and Somerville College Oxford in 1879. Meanwhile Alexander Bain founded *Mind* in 1876, the Aristotelian Society was founded in 1880, and its *Proceedings* began to appear in 1888. That is, just as women became able to take degrees, university education ceased to be sufficient qualification for contributing to philosophical debates; now one had to be part of specialist institutions and venues that were difficult to enter, particularly for women, given the explicit and implicit sexist assumptions endemic at the time. It was not impossible for women to join the philosophy profession, as E. C. Jones did in 1884, but this remained very rare.

The founding of those first two British philosophy journals was part of a wave of professionalization in which the academic disciplines established themselves with their specialist journals, societies, and venues from the 1870s and 1880s onward. Prior to this, intellectual life in nineteenth-century Britain took place in monographs, literature, letters, and—above all—such general periodicals as the *Westminster*, *Edinburgh*, and *Contemporary Reviews* and *Macmillan's* and *Fraser's Magazines*. As Robert Young says, these heavyweight journals constituted the “common intellectual context” up until the 1870s to 1880s.⁴ ‘Common’ must be qualified somewhat, as the presumptive periodical contributor and reader was a man—the ‘man of letters.’ Notwithstanding, the periodicals provided an outlet that some women used to position themselves at the heart of debate. Cobbe did this very successfully.⁵ Through her numerous periodical essays from the 1860s to 1880s (many of them subsequently gathered into books), and through her public and private correspondence, she engaged with many key figures—Charles Darwin, J. S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, and others. Cobbe also engaged extensively with other women, for instance criticizing Harriet Martineau’s agnosticism⁶ and the forthright atheism of the earlier Annie Besant before the latter converted to Theosophy.⁷ The mainstream journals thus provided an accessible medium for writers and readers to exchange views and debate one another, opening up the possibility of debates amongst women. The public found the latter debates sufficiently notable that the *Boston Evening Transcript* advertised an upcoming talk by Besant by listing amongst her achievements “disputing with Francis Power Cobbe” [sic].⁸

Naden, like Cobbe, published in prominent journals—such as the *Journal of Science* in Naden’s case—in the 1880s. Naden also published in one of the new specialist journals, the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*; and in a third milieu—that of the Freethought Publishing Company started in 1877 by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh as leaders of the National Secular Society (again, before Besant adopted Theosophy).⁹ In this setting

Naden published her essay “Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day,” signed “C.N.,” in the journal that Besant edited, *Our Corner* (1883–88), a Freethought publication. *Our Corner* thus featured Naden’s ‘hylo-idealism’ amongst its “array of controversial and ground-breaking topics in politics, science and the arts.”¹⁰ (Other contributors to *Our Corner* were George Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, William Morris, Edith Nesbit, and the German arch-materialist Ludwig Büchner.)¹¹

Alongside ‘established’ journals like *Macmillan’s*, then, circulated other less mainstream, often shorter-lived journals—such as *Our Corner*; socialist and feminist journals; and two Theosophical journals started by Blavatsky, *The Theosophist* (1879–) and *Lucifer* (1887–97). Independent companies, such as Freethought and the Theosophical Publishing Society (1887–1917), published these journals, as well as pamphlets and books. It was primarily in this more radical, left-of-field milieu that Blavatsky and Besant published from the 1870s to 1890s (and after in Besant’s case; Blavatsky died in 1891). But if the venues were less established than those favored by Cobbe, Blavatsky and Besant were nonetheless prominent in British intellectual life—the luminaries gathered in *Our Corner* indicate Besant’s magnetic status.¹²

We see, then, how the rich and varied periodical and publishing culture of Victorian Britain made it possible for women to participate in intellectual debates, become widely known, and publish extensively. This culture made it possible for our four women to engage with one another’s ideas. To be sure, women’s participation in this culture remained restricted and compromised due to the many formal exclusions they faced, including from university education. But women gradually fought their way into universities: Naden benefited, studying at Mason Science College (later incorporated into Birmingham University) and becoming its first female Associate; while Besant studied botany and physiology at the University of London, although she was deemed too politically radical to

graduate. Yet having gained access to education, women then faced exclusion from academic philosophy when it assumed newly professionalized form in the last quarter-century. As a result, despite having previously been part of the public culture of intellectual debate, our four women subsequently became invisible to the discipline of philosophy. How, more specifically, did this happen?

Crucially, to establish philosophy's disciplinary credentials, its practitioners had to distinguish their work from both the earlier, generalist public culture which Cobbe's thought exemplified and from the more politically charged and unorthodox milieux with which Blavatsky, Besant, and to an extent Naden were involved.¹³ So our four women became invisible to the nascent discipline along distinct if overlapping routes. Blavatsky and Besant were relegated to the field of esoteric religion, always more receptive to women, where their ideas continue to receive attention. This relegation happened despite Blavatsky's own insistence that Theosophy was philosophical as much as spiritual.¹⁴ Cobbe got left out because she represented the earlier generalist culture. For instance, reviewing Cobbe's collection *Darwinism in Morals* that includes two of her papers on mind, Sidgwick calls her an "excellent populariser."¹⁵ a non-specialist, highly capable, but not 'one of us.' Naden's case differs, as she was gaining traction in the emerging academic philosophy world, being invited to present at the Aristotelian Society and having her work discussed in the U.S. journal *The Monist* (founded in 1890) by its then editor Paul Carus. But Naden died in 1889 at just thirty-one (from complications from ovarian cysts), abruptly cutting off this process of acceptance. Gender is not the only factor in Naden's case, since the other, male members of the loose hylo-ideal grouping to which she belonged have been forgotten too. Plausibly, this was due to the hylo-idealists' missionary zeal to convert others to their outlook; this militant, campaigning approach remained rooted in the pre-professional public culture. Moreover, the hylo-idealists championed atheism and materialism—off-putting to

professionals seeking a measured, non-sectarian stance. Along these routes, overarched by the polarities of generalism/specialism and partisanship/detachment, professional philosophers started to ignore Cobbe, Naden, Blavatsky and Besant. Once this had begun, subsequent entrants to the profession had to establish their credentials by locating themselves with respect to the accepted figures, not the excluded ones. Then as now, professional validation requires that one keep good intellectual company. In this way our four women became invisible within philosophy.

Now let us consider what the earlier generalist culture meant for philosophy of mind. Before *Mind*, the Aristotelian Society, and other specialist venues were created, the broader periodical culture and republic of letters provided the site for philosophical discussion of mind and psychology, often called ‘mental science’ or ‘mental philosophy.’ In this context, “all levels of Victorian society actively discussed the mind’s capabilities and what they might mean for individuals and society.”¹⁶ For example, the periodicals amply discussed phrenology; this included vehement criticism of Harriet Martineau’s 1851 pro-phrenology stance in *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development*. Within this generalist setting, mind was addressed together with religious concerns around the soul and free will on the one hand, and scientific discoveries about the brain and nervous system on the other. As Edward Reed observes, “‘scientific’ debates over mind, body and soul in the 1800s are inseparable from the religious debates concerning these matters—it is, in fact, anachronistic to separate the two.”¹⁷

In this period physiologists were showing in detail how mental powers depended on the brain, nervous system, and body. The majority sought to reconcile this new physiological knowledge with core Christian tenets—hence the hostility when Martineau relinquished those tenets in favor of phrenological materialism. Cobbe’s writing on the mind from the mid-1860s to early 1870s belongs to the mainstream reconciliatory agenda, although she offers a

unique take on it. But by the 1880s the opposition of science and religion hardened.¹⁸ Espousing science against religion—an outlying position when Martineau took it in 1851—became more common. Naden’s tough-minded materialism and atheism lie at the pro-science end of this hardening opposition. Meanwhile Cobbe now took the religious and anti-science side that arose in counter-reaction. Blavatsky’s and Besant’s panpsychism was an alternative response to this science/religion opposition.

Our four women, then, dealt with the mind not as a stand-alone topic but while simultaneously addressing connected issues in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and religion—like male philosophers of the time. So these women were not doing ‘philosophy of mind’ in the twentieth-century sense but, like their male contemporaries, were examining the mind along with its broader placement in the world, where connections with religion were central. Cobbe sought to vindicate theism; Naden defended atheism; and Blavatsky and Besant propounded a form of pantheism. This sheds light on why these women often treat as effective synonyms concepts that look different to modern readers, as when Naden says that the mind *depends on*, *is*, is a *function of*, and *correlates* with the brain. The distinctions amongst these claims paled to insignificance beside the key issue: Had the mind sufficient independence of the brain to survive the body’s death? For Naden, it did not, so personal immortality and with it theism were ruled out. Conversely, for Cobbe, defending personal immortality and theism meant finding a part of the person that did not depend on the brain—the conscious self, which she distinguished from the mind. For the Theosophists, too, the higher, more spiritual strata of the individual were entangled with but did not ultimately depend on the lower material ones, so that the former were “immortal” and “indestructible,” although—*pace* Cobbe—they were not personal (T 19).

Finally, it is important to look at these women’s views in comparison with one another. To restore women to the history of philosophy, we need to situate their views in the

intellectual landscapes of their periods. But sometimes those landscapes were populated and partly shaped by the views of other women who have also become invisible to us. To recover a given woman's philosophical position, then, it helps to situate it in relation to other positions taken at the time by men *and other women*, which means recovering those other women too. These need not only be women that the author overtly discussed, but may be women whose positions helped to define the intellectual terrain in which she operated.

To be sure, our four women located themselves vis-à-vis men as well as women. Cobbe drew on the “mental physiology” of William Benjamin Carpenter, who by the mid-century was Britain’s leading and most influential physiologist; while Naden initially adopted hylo-idealism from Robert Lewins. And both Cobbe and Besant (after her turn to Theosophy) defined their views of mind against Büchner’s materialism. It is unsurprising that women often foregrounded their intellectual relations (negative or positive) with men, in a context where men’s interventions received more attention and discussion. Nevertheless, because my concern is to restore women to the historical record I concentrate on their relations with one another. Admittedly, Cobbe and Naden did not criticize one another explicitly; neither refers to the other’s work. Nonetheless Naden pitted her atheist materialism against the earlier family of dualist views that balanced religion and science by triangulating soul, mind, and brain, views of which Cobbe’s is a representative instance. Reciprocally, Cobbe defined her dualism against the sort of materialism that Naden went on to defend. For her part, Blavatsky did explicitly position Theosophy in antagonism to Naden’s materialism. And Besant explicitly links the views of all three other women. Besant was from 1872–74 a devotee of Cobbe’s theism, but in the mid-1870s she publicly turned against Cobbe to embrace secular materialism.¹⁹ During that phase, Besant featured Naden’s work in *Our Corner*, helping to bring Naden to public attention; this indicates the shared secularist milieu in which Naden and Besant were then active, within which materialism and atheism were linked. In 1889

Besant changed tack, jettisoning materialism for Blavatsky's Theosophy. Across Besant's changes of mind, then, she remained unafraid to position herself vis-à-vis other women. Her self-positionings in relation to our three other women help to disclose the threads that connect and differentiate their philosophies of mind.

Overall, two types of comparison will run through this essay: comparisons that these women *themselves* made, to varying degrees, between their respective positions; and *my* contrasts and comparisons between their views. Together these comparisons will show that a dialectical dynamic drives the successive emergence of these women's positions on mind.

2. Cobbe on the Conscious Self *versus* the Thinking Brain

Cobbe was extremely well known in Victorian intellectual life, a prominent feminist and the leader of the anti-vivisection movement.²⁰ Following her two-volume *Essay on Intuitive Morals* of 1855–57, she wrote many philosophical essays on moral theory, animal ethics, feminism, aesthetics, Darwinism, science, and religion. She also wrote a group of papers on the mind: "The Fallacies of Memory" (1866), "Unconscious Cerebration" (1870), "Dreams as Instances of Unconscious Cerebration" (1871), and "The Consciousness of Dogs" (1872). Central amongst these is "Unconscious Cerebration," in which Cobbe defends an original form of dualism. These arguments have never been examined in depth; this is what I want to do now.

Cobbe takes issue with materialism, singling out Büchner as its prime representative.²¹ For the materialist, science shows that the brain performs all the functions of thought and memory, so that any appeal to an additional conscious self is unnecessary speculation (exactly the view Naden went on to take). To Cobbe, materialism threatens to rule out moral responsibility and immortality. To avert the threat she argues that the brain

indeed performs all the intellectual functions previously attributed to a separate mind; but this does not entail that the conscious self is *only* the sum of these functions (UC 24). Rather, we can accept the physiological premises but reach the anti-materialist conclusion that “the conscious self is not identifiable with that matter which performs the function of Thought” (UC 25). Thought and the *mind* are functions of the brain,²² but the conscious *self* is different, separable from the thinking mind/brain complex, and the locus of responsibility and immortality.²³

To support this distinction between thinking mind and conscious self, Cobbe appeals to the existence of unconscious thought, called “unconscious cerebration.” Carpenter coined this expression to characterize our many forms of automatic intellectual and ideo-motor processing. This was in his widely read *Principles of Human Physiology* (1856) which influenced Cobbe.²⁴

Cobbe presents many examples of “unconscious cerebration,” including cases where:

- (1) a memory suddenly comes to me of something I had earlier tried unsuccessfully to remember and had given up on; evidently, my brain has unconsciously kept searching out the memory in the meantime;
- (2) we compose art-works or follow out trains of thought without attending to them or when asleep (as with Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*);
- (3) we spontaneously wake at a set time—our brains have counted time unconsciously;
- (4) we dream—dreaming results from unconscious “brain-work” operating according to “laws” distinct from those that govern conscious life (UC 27);
- (5) someone’s consciousness gets invaded by “voices” uttering fully-crafted speeches on which their brain has been unconsciously working;

(6) memories (on which we have unconsciously been dwelling) suddenly come upon us, as if from outside, and can therefore appear as ghostly apparitions. Cobbe likewise explains hypnotic suggestion and trance states by the dominance of unconscious mind. She opposes spiritualist explanations of such phenomena in terms of occult forces and powers, instead explaining these phenomena scientifically;

(7) someone falls into absent-minded or inappropriate behavior, as unconscious thought-processes break through into outward speech or behavior.

Cobbe classifies these phenomena in terms of three different relations between conscious self and unconscious cerebrations. In the first, the conscious self has no appreciable involvement in the brain-work at all—as with a person in somnambulistic or hypnotic states. In the second, the conscious self originally initiated a certain mental or ideomotor process and the unconscious mind has carried it on even after the conscious self has moved its attention elsewhere. In the third relation—as in dreams and with, for instance, apparitions—the conscious self does not and cannot control the brain's activities but just observes their results. The constant factor across all three is that “while the actions are being performed, the conscious self is either wholly uncognizant of them or [is cognizant of them or their results but is] unable to control them” (UC 34). Indeed, all Cobbe’s examples (1)–(7) involve thoughts coming to someone’s awareness without their having any control over them. Whether or not the person had previously voluntarily initiated the relevant train of thought, it is now unfolding involuntarily.

Cobbe infers that the brain can unconsciously (i) remember, (ii) understand, (iii) imagine, (iv) reason, (v) perform habitual activities, and (vi) count time. On (iv), Cobbe is firm that the brain can unconsciously reason, as when it works out the solution to a problem one had consciously put aside (UC 29). Can the brain unconsciously *think*? Against Cartesianism, Cobbe says yes, for surely (i)–(vi) constitute thought—“it would be an unusual

definition of the word ‘Thought’ which would debar us from applying it to the above phenomena” (UC 35).

But *who* is thinking here? For materialists such as Büchner, the answer is the brain. (Naden will say the same too.) However, Cobbe says, we can also initiate thinking processes voluntarily. Who does the initiating then? Cobbe answers: *I do. Who am ‘I?’* Whenever I say, ‘I did X,’ Cobbe says, ‘I’ refers to the conscious agent, which is also identical with the self. However, it doesn’t make sense, Cobbe claims, to say: “I am beating slowly,” that is, to use ‘I’ to refer to some particular organ of my body (the heart) (UC 36). By analogy, Cobbe takes it, it is incorrect to use ‘I’ to refer to my brain to say, for example, ‘I am dreaming vividly.’ This is incorrect because I as agent do not initiate or guide the dreaming, which instead is undertaken unconsciously by my brain. If Büchner was right that I simply am my brain, then all the unconscious work done by my brain would *eo ipso* be being undertaken by me; I would not distinguish between the things my brain does without my control and the actions I willfully undertake. But I do—that is the force of the many examples of unconscious cerebration which I do *not* control. As Cobbe puts it:

Is this instrument [the brain] *ourselves*? Are *we* quite inseparable from this machinery of our thoughts? If it never acted except by our volition and under our control, then, indeed, it might be somewhat difficult to conceive of our consciousness apart from it. But every night a different lesson is taught us . . . [namely that] the dreaming brain-self is not the true self. (D 523)

In short, Cobbe counts the existence of unconscious mind against the materialist view that the self is the brain. For that existence exposes that there is a difference between the unconscious mind—the totality of cerebral functions unconsciously carried out by the brain—and the conscious self—the agent who can sometimes initiate and direct courses of

thinking and acting. Thus we find that, in addition to the thinking brain, “there is another agency in the field” (UC 37).

The materialist could firstly object—as Cobbe admits—that the fact that the brain can think without consciousness does not entail that the self can be conscious without a brain (37). She replies, though, that it does show that (1) the relation between conscious self and thinking brain is variable and intermittent, hence (2) that the two are separable, hence (3) that it is at least possible that the former can persist without the latter. However, the materialist could dispute the move to (2), replying that the variability arises because only some thoughts rise to consciousness, but where consciousness remains a function of the brain and so cannot exist without it. Second, the materialist can further object, Cobbe’s heart/brain analogy fails because the brain, unlike the heart, is the organ of thought. For this reason I *can* correctly say ‘I dreamed vividly’ or ‘I composed a poem when asleep,’ and so on. Third, the materialist can object that, when some of my actions are accompanied by the idea or feeling that they are voluntary, this merely registers the fact that these actions originate causally from my own internal desires, themselves fully part of nature’s all-encompassing causal chain. Or, as Thomas Henry Huxley would put it, volition is “an emotion indicative of physical changes, not a cause of such changes.”²⁵ (As we will see, Naden makes all these materialist arguments—that consciousness is merely a variable function of the brain; that I am my brain; and that the idea of free will merely registers my brain’s unimpeded action.)

Cobbe, then, is in one respect anti-Cartesian: she accepts unconscious thought, and therefore is not a traditional dualist. But, this aside, she remains in the Cartesian tradition insofar as she attributes consciousness to a non-material self. Her moral and religious concerns are relevant here, for she identifies the self with the immortal soul. She closes her essay by adapting Ecclesiastes 12:7: “when the dust returns to the dust whence it was taken, the Spirit—the Conscious Self of Man—shall return to God who gave it” (the middle clause

is Cobbe's interpolation; UC 37). Cobbe wanted to hold on to an immortal soul because she considered immortality necessary for morality. Since the world is full of suffering and imperfection, we can only believe in and be motivated by morality if there is an afterlife in which our souls continue to make moral progress, until ultimately complete congruence of virtue and happiness is reached.

To contextualize Cobbe's stance, the British nineteenth century saw the religious concept 'soul' gradually transition into the scientific concept 'mind.'²⁶ Cobbe wanted to have both, retaining the soul, as conscious self, alongside the mind, as function of the brain. This was part of her attempt to balance religious claims about the soul with scientific knowledge about the brain. She did this in an original way, even as her approach belongs to the family of middle-to-later-century endeavors to reconcile science and religion by combining mind, brain, and soul.

Ingenious as Cobbe's attempted reconciliation is, she does not succeed in separating conscious self from thinking mind, for on her own account the conscious self *does* think in certain respects. For Cobbe, the conscious self bears moral responsibility. Dream-thought, however, exhibits a total "absence of the moral sense" (D 521); in dreams we regularly fulfil wishes on which we would judge it wrong to act when awake. That automatic brain-thought is free from moral regulation confirms that the conscious self, not the thinking brain, bears moral responsibility. "The conscious self being dormant in dreams, . . . the phenomenon of Conscience cannot be developed in them" (UC 28). Now Cobbe takes a Kantian view of morality, holding that there is a non-natural moral law that obligates us irrespective of our empirical circumstances.²⁷ But arguably, in apprehending the moral law, the conscious self *is* thinking. Cobbe maintains that we intuit the moral law—but she is a rationalist intuitionist for whom 'intuiting' means 'grasping a priori.' If we are not thinking when we grasp what is rationally implied in the concept of duty and what moral principles derive from it, then it is

hard to see what we are doing. To use Cobbe's own phrase, "it would be an unusual definition of the word 'Thought' which would debar us from applying it to the above phenomena."

It is a problem for Cobbe if the conscious self thinks because in "Unconscious Cerebration" she attributes thinking to the brain but consciousness to the non-physical self. If, however, the conscious self thinks, then either we must concede to materialism that the conscious self depends on the thinking brain after all, or we must move to a fuller-blown dualism in which some thinking, perhaps its most consequential part, proceeds independently of the brain. Cobbe's attempted separation of thinking brain-mind from conscious self cannot ultimately be sustained.

Cobbe realized this, moving on to fuller-blown dualism in "The Life after Death" (1874). This was part of her broader turn towards religion and away from science from the mid-1870s onwards, which she made partly because her intensifying anti-vivisection struggle brought her up against the scientific establishment, and partly because scientific developments were becoming harder to reconcile with Christian beliefs. Agnosticism, atheism, and secularism were rising, and Cobbe combatted them. Becoming absorbed in opposing vivisection, science, and atheism, she moved away from philosophy of mind; her concern was no longer to balance religion and science but rather to stop science encroaching on religion and morality any further. She grew more and more opposed to what she saw as a rising tide of materialism about the mind, within which she would certainly have included Naden's work had she known of it. However, one thing Cobbe retained from "Unconscious Cerebration" was anti-spiritualism; so, since Theosophy had roots in spiritualism, she could never accept it. For Cobbe, the antidote to excessive materialism remained Christian theism, not an alternative religion and certainly not one with a journal called *Lucifer* for its mouthpiece.

3. Naden, Hylo-Idealism, and the Pre-Eminence of the Brain

Naden was one of several thinkers who tirelessly expounded and propagandized hylo-idealism from the 1870s to 1890s. Between them they wrote “over twenty pamphlets and books and poured out a barrage of articles, reviews, and letters to periodicals.”²⁸ Robert Lewins initially devised the position, calling it “hylo-zoism,” before Naden, having become a convert, renamed it “hylo-idealism.”²⁹ Hylo-idealism’s chief motivations were passionate atheism conjoined with confidence in scientific knowledge, especially regarding the brain and nervous system. Hylo-idealism never exhausted Naden’s interests—she wrote on epistemology, metaphysics, the history of philosophy, and ethics—and she was moving away from hylo-idealism before her untimely death. But she was best known for her hylo-idealistic writings and so I shall look at these, especially “The Brain Theory of Mind and Matter; or Hylo-Idealism” (1883) and “Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day” (1884).³⁰ In both, Naden forwards a materialist theory of mind as a core part of hylo-idealism—a materialist theory of the sort Cobbe had rejected.

Hylo-idealism combines two key theses: (1) idealism: all that I can know is my own ideas, so that ‘man is the measure of all things,’ and each of us lives in our own self-generated mental world; but also (2) *hyle*-ism, that is, materialism: the agency producing these ideas is the brain, responding to causal stimuli impinging on it. Like Cobbe’s dualism, hylo-idealism has not yet been examined in critical depth.³¹ To do so I shall set out the position, clarifying how Naden pitted it against the family of later-mid-century British dualisms of which Cobbe’s is an instance. In part, Naden rejected these theories because they upheld traditional theism, whereas she was a committed atheist. Having explained this I will

consider hylo-idealism's problems, arguing that Naden was unable to resolve them (which is partly why she was moving away from hylo-idealism just before she died).

On the idealist side, Naden holds that "man is the maker of his own Cosmos, and . . . all his perceptions—even those which seem to represent solid, extended, and external objects—have a merely subjective existence, bounded by . . . his sentient being" (BT 157). Naden takes it that we do not perceive objects directly but only indirectly, through representations or ideas of them. But then we cannot get beyond our ideas to access any objects with which to compare them. We therefore have no grounds to believe that our ideas in any way resemble that which lies beyond them, or that our ideas give us access to the things they represent. Naden argues that as this goes for all our ideas, each of us lives in our own world, and these worlds are our own individual visions.

But Naden gives this position a materialist formulation. The reason why we only see our own ideas and world-visions is because of how our brains work. Consider sight: when light acts on the normal retina, one sees a whole range of colors, whereas a colorblind person with different retinas sees a more limited range (BT 159). This exemplifies the general process whereby things affect the sense-organs, which convey stimuli through the nervous system to the brain, which in turn "transmute[s] identical stimuli, conveyed to it by different channels, into results" (BT 160), yielding a panorama of sights, smells, sounds, etc. So "the world-vision, to which alone the mind has access, is made inside, and not outside, the cerebrum" (BT 158, 160).

Thus Naden's idealism is at once a form of materialism, as when she says that: "All ideas . . . are of course equally subjective, since none can boast an origin higher than the human brain" (BT 165). On this materialist side, Naden maintains that we need postulate no spiritual or non-material forces, qualities, or structures within matter to explain how it can operate creatively in generating mental representations. Rather, matter contains inherent

“material energy”—it is not imbued with any non-material animating principles, but matter is already energetic, its parts acting on one another of their own momentum. In terms of the nineteenth-century debate between ‘transcendentalists’ and ‘immanentists’ about life—where transcendentalists believed that life must be explained by a transcendental, non-natural principle within matter, immanentists that life arises naturally within matter—Naden is an immanentist.³² Once certain energetic parts of matter enter into sufficiently complex configurations, living organisms result, some of which evolve internal configurations sufficiently complex—containing spinal column, nervous system, cerebrum, etc.—that they have sensation. In short, we each live in worlds of our own making because these worlds are what our brains produce in processing stimuli from the matter around them.

This shows that it is ultimately Naden’s materialism about the mind that drives her idealism. It is thought’s dependence on the brain, for Naden, that entails that we cannot know the world as it is independently of the brain and its mechanisms for converting stimuli into representations. How exactly does Naden see the mind/brain relation? She says that: (1) ideas “correlate” with and “correspond” to bodily states (WR 124); (2) the psychical “depends” on the physical (MP 81); (3) the brain’s processes “cause,” “generate,” and “produce” ideas (WR 124, BT 164); (4) consciousness is a cerebral “function,” evolved by complexity of organization, and that “perception, emotion and thought are simply the special sensations or functions of the . . . encephalon” (FR 195). Overarching these different formulations, on one point Naden is adamant: physiological research has demonstrated that the psychical is through-and-through dependent on the physical in a way that demolishes dualism.

For her time Naden was unusual in the boldness with which she rejected dualism. In “Hylo-Zoism versus Animism” of 1881 (FR 191–97), she opposed J. H. Barker’s dualism. Barker argued that human life and the mind could not be explained as merely further-developed manifestations of animal life, nor animal life explained as manifesting a prior

cosmic life.³³ For “cosmic life” is merely metaphorical: matter, just as such, is not alive. The presence of life and mind in animals requires a separate active principle, the soul or *anima*. The same goes for human beings; in human and animal cases, life arises from the union of soul and body. The human soul, though, is immortal, created by God, and will survive the body’s death.

Naden replies that there is no soul or separate mental substance in which ideas inhere; ideas are in all cases ideas of the brain (*FR* 193–94). “To regard the intellect as an entity, separable from the myriad [physical] factors, which unite to produce and direct it, is . . . absurd” (BT 164). Ideas and mental functioning completely depend on the brain for their occurrence, so neither can possibly occur without a brain and body. Whereas for Barker invoking souls is necessary because we cannot explain how mental qualities arise on a purely physical basis, Naden disagrees. For her, we can explain this perfectly well, because matter is already energetic and, once its energetic interconnections become sufficiently complex, sensation results.

Consequently, for Naden, personal immortality is ruled out: the only part of us that is immortal and will endure after we die is the material-energetic life-processes and forces of which our bodies and minds are composed. Naden also rejected Barker’s argument that our exercises of free will manifest the soul in its difference from the body (*FR* 194). For Naden, when I exercise free will in, say, deciding to take a walk, what is happening here is that my (material) brain is acting on other (equally material) parts of my body. No separate mind or soul is involved; and even if we did have one, being immaterial, it could not possibly interact with the brain and body to produce movement. The only way to explain voluntary actions is to say that the agent’s brain is acting on their nerves and musculature; everything here is corporeal. As for my idea that I am deciding to walk, this idea is just my brain’s registration that my action (walking) is being done from motivations arising unimpeded from within my

own brain. Naden is a compatibilist, for whom I act freely just when my action “proceeds . . . from [my] internal constitution,” functioning normally, rather than from either “external compulsion” or pathologically malfunctioning internal parts (BT 163).

Naden thus set herself against views on which we are compounds of mortal body and immortal soul, with our souls bearing free will and moral responsibility. Barker’s was one such view, Cobbe’s another. Proponents of these views retained the soul even as physiologists identified the physical bases of ever more of the mental actions and operations previously attributed to it. Carpenter’s demonstration of how extensively the brain performs mental and ideo-motor processing automatically was important here. Naden knew and referred to Carpenter’s work to back up her insistence that the mental depends on the physical (MP 81). But Carpenter himself still believed in immortal souls. So did Cobbe, and in a way that drew on Carpenter. So although Naden did not position herself against Cobbe explicitly, she was positioning herself against the family of dualisms to which Cobbe belonged. Cobbe’s view was part of the intellectual landscape against which Naden reacted.

A further reason why Naden opposed these dualist views was that they compromised with religion.³⁴ For Naden, the creative powers that humanity had formerly ceded to an imaginary God are really our own and the time is ripe to reclaim them. She transposes the language of God’s creation of the world onto the human brain—we must learn, she says, to behold in the orderly arrangements of the Cosmos only a supreme glorification of [brain-]matter, the universal mother, and of man, her child . . . In the grey cells of the cerebral cortex are generated . . . the visible heaven, [and] the poetic sense of its beauty and harmony. (BT 166)

Each brain creates a complete universe, Naden emphasises: the creation is entirely our own, and no room is left for any creation by God. The brain is “the only authentic Creator of the

world as yet discovered” and “is its own God” (HI 170–71). Much as Naden’s idealism owes to Berkeley, then, her conjunction of idealism with atheism sets her far apart from him.³⁵

Plausibly, it was largely Naden’s atheism that motivated her to conjoin idealism and materialism (as Blavatsky noticed; see Sec. 4). Idealism, in Naden’s version, supports atheism because it means that humans are sovereign creative agents; while materialism also supports atheism because it means that matter generates the full wealth and complexity of the universe with no need for God or a divine plan. By combining both currents, Naden hopes for a maximally atheist position. In stressing our sovereign agency Naden is not reverting to a dualist belief in free will. Rather, she equates our sovereign *thinking* agency in creating an ordered experienced cosmos with the *brain’s* agency in generating ideas from stimuli, which in turn is an instance of *matter’s* agency in organizing itself through its own energies into complex configurations. For a voluntarist like Cobbe, the equation fails: the creativity of my unconsciously working brain is certainly real (viz. *Kubla Khan*) but it is no more *my* creativity than I would be acting creatively if I were being swept downstream by a river surging forward energetically. But from Naden’s perspective, when my brain generates ideas or galvanizes actions on my part, this *is* my creativity, because I am my brain. Cobbe would disagree, appealing to the distinction of unconscious brain-processes from my voluntary actions. But Naden considers it simpler and more consistent to place our entire mental life—conscious and unconscious, voluntary and involuntary—on the same cerebral basis. *Contra* Cobbe, neither conscious attention and voluntary action devolve upon a separate soul; they merely comprise subsets of all our cerebral, sensory, and motor processes.

Hylo-idealism suffers from problems, however. If each of us lives in our own cosmos of ideas and we cannot know how things are outside that cosmos, then how do we know about the causal-energetic processes by which the brain responds to impingements from the matter surrounding it?³⁶ Naden gives several answers.

(1) We can only know our ideas, but we can legitimately make inductive generalizations about the laws at work in nature as it figures in our ideas—including the laws of how the brain works, again as we observe brains, that is, as brains appear in our ideas.³⁷ Thus we can know about brain operations through the inductive method of science. But science's ultimate data are observations—since, after all, we can only know about our own ideas. That is, Naden's account of science is phenomenalist; she combines scientific materialism and phenomenalist epistemology. Yet the tension remains between the phenomenalist account of matter and the claim that brain-matter generates these same phenomena.

(2) Returning to light acting on the retina, Naden clarifies that really what acts on the retina is an “unknown force” that we call light, but where the perception of this force *as* light is an effect of the brain’s metabolism. “Beyond this [brain-metabolism] there is practically nothing, for our wildest imagination cannot overleap the boundaries of self, and depict an invisible course of light” (BT 159). In short, something affects the brain here, but we cannot know what this something may be like independently of how the brain represents it. The case of light is no different from anything else: all these forces acting on the brain are unknowable to us. We cannot even really say that they are forces: there is only void and formless chaos until the brain imposes an arrangement on it (BT 166).

However, Naden’s critics rejoined, surely that must apply to the brain too, so that we cannot legitimately say that there really are such things as brains, only that the world of ideas originates somehow. Here Naden’s idealism undermines her materialism: as we can only know our own ideas, we cannot advance beyond these ideas to know that it is brains that generate them. To be sure, we can have ideas about brains, as we do about many things; but as ideas do not inform us about anything beyond themselves, neither do our ideas about brains inform us about brains as they are independently of the ideas.

(3) Naden acknowledges the problem: “[I] If the universe be simply . . . a vision . . . , how are we to know that there is any such thing as matter? . . . [II] how are we to be sure that the brain itself really exists, and that the all-generating cells are not mere illusory appearances?” (HI 172). She turns to (II) first. (a) Sticking within my own ideas, I find that I *actively* think and organize my experience. My ideas exhibit order. Thus: “We are obliged to assume the existence of some active basis of thought, that is, of something which thinks.” (b) We can know that this active basis is the brain: “having seen that sensation and motion follow upon excitation of the brain, . . . we are justified in restoring our thought-cells to their proud creative eminence” and in saying “that they think, and therefore exist” (HI 173). Then, regarding (I), for the brain to be able to think there must be a surrounding world of matter with which it is in material-energetic interchange. “From the material protoplasm of consciousness we argue . . . to a material protoplasm of the objects of consciousness, and therefore to a real world which existed before man was.”

Unfortunately, step (b)—I know by observation that my thinking agency has its source in a material object, the brain—is problematic. For Naden takes it that in at least this one case observations give us access to reality as it is in itself. But then why not say the same for other observations, and abandon the premise that “the universe is merely a vision” in the first place? Naden offered other attempted solutions, but hylo-idealism’s problems remained intractable. The position was not a stable but an unstable union of idealism and materialism, in which the idealism continually undermined the materialism that was meant to ground it. Indeed, this was precisely what Blavatsky—one of hylo-idealism’s most incisive critics—went on to argue.

4. Blavatsky and Besant: Explaining the Mind

In 1888, as part of their promotional campaign, the hylo-idealists sent some writings to *Lucifer*, the Theosophical journal founded the previous year by Helena Blavatsky, its editor. Blavatsky was the principal figure behind Theosophy. Originally from Russia, she co-established the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 and, after extensive international travels including five years in India, she settled in London in 1887. By then the Theosophical movement was bedeviled by controversies and schisms. While in India Blavatsky had started the movement's first journal, *The Theosophist*, but she relinquished the editorship following accusations that she and others had been fraudulently producing spiritual phenomena. Blavatsky re-established herself in London but now needed to re-assert her authority over competing factions in the British Theosophical movement. To that end she founded *Lucifer*. It featured a lively mixture of essays, fiction, translations (for instance from Giordano Bruno), reviews (for example of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), letters, and other miscellanea from mainly Theosophical authors, with Blavatsky presiding over the whole with regular statements of Theosophical position.

Having received the hylo-idealists' materials, Blavatsky singled out Naden's writing for its "extremely attractive" style and published her short atheist piece "Autocentrism" (signed "C.N.") plus two hylo-idealistic letters, from Lewins and George McCrie. But, signing herself "The Adversary," Blavatsky appended a critique of hylo-idealism, to which in fact she had already noted her objections in late 1887 when she read Naden's "What Is Religion?"³⁸ In these notes, subsequently published in *The Theosophist* in 1896, Blavatsky went as far as to declare that: "Theosophy has no bitterer enemy than *Hylo-Idealism*, the great ally of materialism, today" (MI 9).

Blavatsky's criticisms of hylo-idealism are interesting, first, as a case of intellectual engagement, indeed disagreement, between women. Second, these criticisms centrally involve the mind. Blavatsky's view—subsequently taken up by Besant—is that materialism

cannot explain consciousness. To clarify, before encountering hylo-idealism Blavatsky had already reached this anti-materialist conclusion, in particular opposition to Huxley but also others such as Büchner (who was Cobbe's *bête noire*, we remember).³⁹ Blavatsky thus saw hylo-idealism as only the latest version of a materialist view of mind that she already opposed. Third, Blavatsky's anti-materialism about the mind helps to motivate Theosophy, which integrally includes a form of panpsychism. Whereas Cobbe's and Naden's philosophies of mind have been almost totally ignored, Theosophy's case is different, as it has received continuous attention both in Theosophical circles and in studies of religion and esotericism. However, what has not been examined is how considerations in philosophy of mind help to motivate Blavatsky's and Besant's Theosophical views, as I shall show here.

Blavatsky's criticisms of hylo-idealism are as follows:

(1) If we can only know our own ideas, then we cannot know about the brain; conversely, if we can know about the brain, then it cannot be true that we know only our own ideas (LHL 509).

(2) Thus, hylo-idealism's materialism and idealism contradict one another. The goal of uniting them is worthy, but this unification should be carried out by showing both subject and object, mind and empirical world, to be derivative and partial forms of a more basic, all-encompassing unity (MI 10). Instead hylo-idealists treat *both* matter and ideas in turn as absolute, which yields no real unity but merely an inconsistent hybrid—"a modern cross-breed between misunderstood Protagoras and Büchner" (LHL 509).

(3) What ultimately unites hylo-idealism's materialist and idealist poles are its "atheism and pessimism"—meaning by "pessimism" the denial of immortality (MI 94). Blavatsky rejects any "unphilosophical, anthropomorphic deity" (LHL 511), but she believes in a divine unity conceived not as a person but the ground of all things. And while she also

agrees that our finite selves are not immortal, she thinks that there is an immortal kernel in each of us, so that we can hope for progressive spiritual improvement after our bodies die.

(4) The hylo-idealists do not succeed in explaining consciousness on a material basis, for the two orders differ fundamentally, resulting in the “*absolute impossibility of explaining spiritual effects by physical causes*” (LHL 509). The hylo-idealists show only that there are constant correlations between certain brain-states and certain mental phenomena, but not *why* the former necessitate the latter. To explain, Blavatsky quotes from John Tyndall’s 1868 paper “Scientific Materialism.” This is at first sight surprising. For Tyndall had by then become infamous for his 1874 Belfast Address, especially his claim to see in “Matter . . . the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life.”⁴⁰ That claim became a byword for materialism and atheism.⁴¹ But Blavatsky invokes Tyndall to show that even one of materialism’s key proponents concedes that the mind defies materialistic explanation.

Tyndall does indeed concede this. He argues in “Scientific Materialism” that inanimate objects are as they are entirely because of their physical constituents and their causal interactions. Scientists can completely explain inanimate objects on this basis; no appeal to a divine architect is needed. Likewise with living entities, like a grain of corn; again science can in principle explain everything about them, even though in practice unravelling the complex causal interactions composing some living entities may take a very long time. Tyndall might have said something similar of brain and mind—but instead he maintains that with the mind principled limits apply. Science informs us that certain brain-states invariably go along with certain thoughts and feelings, and *vice versa*. But this is only an empirical association. We cannot say why these invariably go together—why certain molecular motions in the brain cause particular mental phenomena.

Granted that a definite thought, and a definite molecular action in the brain, occur simultaneously; we . . . [cannot] pass, by a process of reasoning, from the one to the

other. They appear together, but we do not know why. Were . . . [we able] to see and feel the very molecules of the brain . . . we should be as far as ever from the solution of the problem, “How are these physical processes connected with the facts of consciousness?” The chasm between the two classes of phenomena would still remain intellectually impassable. Let the consciousness of love, for example, be associated with a right-handed spiral motion of the molecules of the brain, and the consciousness of hate with a left-handed spiral motion. We should then know, when we love, that the motion is in one direction, and, when we hate, that the motion is in the other; but the WHY? would remain as unanswerable as before.⁴²

Beyond these limits, Tyndall concludes, materialism cannot pass. Neither should we bring in religion to fill in the gap, he adds in the Belfast Address, for religion is non-cognitive, ministering to our emotional needs. Science is our only source of knowledge concerning nature; but this knowledge has limits that we must simply accept.⁴³

As we saw, Naden denied these limits to materialistic explanation. For her antagonist Barker, explaining conscious experience required appeal to separate souls. Naden countered that consciousness simply arises when organisms and their nervous and cerebral systems become sufficiently complex; no further explanatory factors need be invoked. But Blavatsky contends that organic complexity would only suffice to explain consciousness if there were nothing in the latter over and above the former. But there is: nothing like the subjective, phenomenal, or first-personal quality of experience is already in the causal-energetic interactions amongst parts of matter. We are dealing with “two different classes of phenomena” (LHL 509).

Blavatsky’s claim that mind cannot be explained materialistically was taken up by Besant. As I mentioned earlier, having in the earlier 1870s espoused Cobbe’s theism, Besant then turned against Cobbe and adopted secularism; during Besant’s secularist period, she

helped to bring Naden's work forward. Also during that phase, Besant translated Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff*—like Naden, Besant combined secularism with materialism. Yet Besant had growing doubts about secularism which came to a head when she reviewed Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* in 1889. Besant converted to Theosophy, thereafter rising to become President of the British Theosophical Society. Amongst the motivations for her conversion were doubts about materialist explanations of life and mind. As she wrote to Bradlaugh, "this form of Pantheism [namely Theosophy] appears to me to promise solution of some problems, especially problems in Psychology, which Atheism leaves untouched" (A 353).

Besant explains further in her 1890 pamphlet "Why I Became a Theosophist."

Addressing criticisms of her turn to Theosophy from her former secularist allies, Besant replies that if we really value free thought, then we must consider arguments that support spiritual, religious, and metaphysical claims and accept their conclusions if the arguments are sound. Furthermore, Besant says, she is as committed as ever to rejecting supernaturalism. Everything in the universe must be explained with no appeal to miracles, divine interventions, or other events contravening the laws of nature. But having for ten years sought along the lines of Materialistic Science for the answer to . . . questions on Life and Mind . . . [namely] "What is Life? What is Thought?" Not only was materialism unable to answer the question, but it declared pretty positively that no answer could ever be given. (T 6)

First, Besant says, we cannot explain life from mere movements and energy transfers amongst bits of matter—from "the blind clash of atoms and the hurtling of forces" (T 7). Something in life goes beyond anything present in physical and chemical processes; Besant calls it a *sui generis* element (T 7). It is this novel element in life that calls for explanation, for which we appeal to its physical and chemical bases. But precisely because this element

goes beyond anything in the physical and chemical domains, their workings are insufficient to account for its emergence or character.

Second, in parallel, we cannot explain mental phenomena from brain processes.

Materialism traces a correlation between living nervous matter and intellection; it demonstrates a parallelism between the growing complexity of the nervous system and growing complexity of phaenomena of consciousness; . . . it shows that certain cerebral activities normally accompany certain psychical activities. That is, it proves that . . . there is a close connection between living nervous matter and thought-processes. As to the *nature* of that connection knowledge is dumb. (T 8; my emphasis)

As we can see, Besant is reprising arguments from Blavatsky (and in turn Tyndall). Besant also ridicules here the German materialist Karl Vogt's slogan that "the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile." There is no "as" about it, Besant objects, for bile is physical and thoughts are not.

We study the nerve-cells of the brain; we find molecular vibration; we are still in the Object World, amid form, color, resistance and motion. Suddenly there is a THOUGHT, and all is changed. We have passed into a new world, the Subject World . . . Between the Motion and the Thought, between the Subject and Object, lies an unspanned gulf. (T 8)

However, Besant continues, the gulf between brain and mind remains uncrossable only if, as most scientists assume, the only possible kind of explanation is materialist, that is, proceeds from lower- to higher-order phenomena. In that case, the brain-mind connection must remain mysterious and knowledge will seem simply to have reached its limits here (T 7). However, for naturalists, everything is to be explained and nothing treated as mysterious. Anti-supernaturalism, then, pushes us to question materialism. According to Besant's above

point regarding life, to explain Y from X there must be at least as much in X as in Y; but if there is anything more or *sui generis* in Y, then we cannot completely explain it from X. So we must see whether we can progress in explaining why life and mind emerge from matter by reversing materialism and starting from the *higher*-order phenomena. “Is ‘spirit’ the flower of ‘matter,’ or ‘matter’ the crystallisation of ‘spirit?’” (T 16). For Besant, the latter view can satisfy our explanatory requirements. This is so in two ways.

(1) If matter derives from a spiritual element in the first place, then we can explain how life and mind emerge from matter in terms of the spiritual element’s progressive *re*-emergence into forms closer to its original one. That is, we can explain mind from matter if there is already something mental in matter, all the way down. For then “assuming intelligence is primal, the developed and dawning faculties of the human mind fall into intelligible order, and can be studied with hope of comprehension” (T 16).

(2) And we can explain how matter derives from this primal mental or spiritual element because we are deriving a lower-level—thinner, less complicated—phenomenon from a higher-level—richer, more complex—one. There is more in X than Y, so the explanation succeeds.

Generally, then, the Theosophical approach to mind is that a primary overarching unity precedes the mind/matter division. But this unity ultimately falls more on the mental or spiritual side—it is an ideal unity.⁴⁴ Since the unity divides into matter *versus* spirit, the unity is not spiritual in the same way as the derivative, finite forms of spirit that differ from matter. Nonetheless, just in self-dividing the primal unity exhibits life, intelligence, and spirit: life insofar it exercises activity and creativity in generating the cosmos; intelligence insofar as it generates the cosmos in intelligible ways; and spirit insofar as it is not originally material.⁴⁵ Crucially, though, the primal unity is not the Christian God but a non-personal divinity; Theosophy is a form of pantheism, not theism. As it is not a person, the unity generates the

cosmos not by creation but emanation. It descends into matter, out of which spirit then successively re-emerges, part of an immense cosmic movement from “involution” (spirit to matter) through “evolution” (matter to spirit).

Blavatsky’s elaboration of this view, above all in her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), is complicated, but let me summarize a few of her key theses. The primal unity generates an endless succession of periodically growing and disappearing universes, each time subdividing into prime matter *versus* structuring divine ideas. The imposition of the latter on the former results in solar systems containing planets; our earth is one. It becomes populated by a succession of seven “Root-Races,” each housed on a particular continent, but the continents and their Root-Races undergo successive destructions. Our predecessors—the fourth Root-Race—were the Atlanteans, whose descendants survived into ancient India to originate our own, fifth, Root-Race, the “Aryans.” Whereas the earliest Root-Races were ethereal beings, a process of increasing descent into matter has yielded the mixed physical-and-spiritual hybrids that we are today.

This brings us to Blavatsky’s account of the human being as composed from seven principles: (i) spirit, (ii) spiritual soul, (iii) intelligent soul or mind, (iv) animal soul, (v) astral body, (vi) vitality, and (vii) physical body (*SD* 1:153). The individual’s higher, more spiritual levels generally exist only as embedded in and entangled with the lower, more physical ones. It is possible, though, for our higher selves temporarily to become free from the lower ones and act independently—as seen, Besant claims, in clairvoyance, astral travelling, thought-transference (telepathy) and mesmerism (T 10–11, 23). These phenomena testify to our great untapped psychical powers, which are normally restricted by our lower physical aspects.

Levels (i) to (iii) are the immortal kernel in each individual, which undergoes successive reincarnations, whereas the “lower quaternary” is mortal. As intelligent souls, we can be more or less submerged in the desires and feelings of our animal souls, and through

karma this affects what future reincarnations we undergo. The more we transcend physical influences within our lives, the more our immortal aspect can escape future lives of physical suffering, re-enter the earth in more spiritually advanced forms, and so further the ascent of humanity, and indeed the entire earth, back to a spiritual condition. Thus, unlike Naden, Blavatsky affirms the immortality of the soul; but from Blavatsky's perspective, theists such as Cobbe wrongly take only the finite individual self—the intelligent soul—to be immortal. The spirit and spiritual soul, however, are *impersonal* (MI 12), and so is the intelligent soul to the extent that it transcends the feeling soul. So what reincarnates is not personal individuals but the non-personal kernels within us.⁴⁶ Thus whereas Cobbe affirms and Naden denies personal immortality, Blavatsky and Besant affirm non-personal immortality.

Blavatsky had many motivations for constructing her Theosophical world-view. Explaining how and why the mental emerges from the physical was only one; but that one does help to motivate her position (see, for example, *SD* 1:38). The explanation, we've seen, is that there is a primordial spiritual life that descends into the finite material world and must then re-emerge from it, including in the guise of individual human minds and the course of spiritual evolution in which they participate. The emergence of mental life from the brain is thus unmysterious inasmuch as it is only part of the cosmic process by which the original unity eventually regains a spiritual guise closer to its original condition. Mental phenomena present no mystery because nothing new appears here that was not already present right at the very origins of the cosmos (*SD* 1:274). In explaining the mind in this way, the Theosophist accepts science's explanatory programme but holds that to fulfil this programme we must abandon materialism for spiritualism.

5. Conclusion: From Dualism through Materialism to Panpsychism

One might conclude that if we need Blavatsky's elaborate cosmology to explain mental phenomena then the cure is worse than the disease; better simply to accept that scientific materialism has explanatory limits, or hold *contra* Tyndall that these limits are only practical and not principled. These are reasonable objections, but we can also distinguish the overall *structure* of the Theosophical approach to mind—monist panpsychism—from Blavatsky's particular system. Blavatsky's and Besant's arguments for panpsychism have merit, arcane as Blavatsky's metaphysical system may be.

Moreover, there is an interesting dialectic amongst our four women's views on the mind, as I will now reconstruct. Just as Naden's position emerges dialectically out of problems in Cobbe-style dualism, likewise Blavatsky's and Besant's panpsychism emerges dialectically out of problems in Naden-style materialism.

Cobbe attempted to reconcile theism with physiological discoveries about the brain by conceding thought to the brain but carving off a separate conscious soul. Yet Cobbe conceded so much to the brain that little work was left for the soul to do, undermining the case for believing in it. This is a further reason why Cobbe herself went on to re-attribute thought to the soul, siding with religion against science. But the problem went beyond Cobbe's work: the more mental functions were shown to be performed by the brain, the less role remained for the soul. For Naden, the message was clear: go with physiological findings; accept that all mental powers depend on the brain, nervous system, and body; and drop the fiction of separate mental substances or souls. If that entailed abandoning traditional Christianity, fine; so much more space for human creative sovereignty.

But Naden's materialism had problems. The one Blavatsky found most telling was that neither Naden nor any other materialist could explain how physical brain-processes give rise to experienced thoughts—in Besant's terms, how object-world gives rise to subject-world. Thus, when materialists like Naden began to deny emphatically that there are any

souls or separate mental substances, this placed the full burden of explaining experienced mental phenomena onto physical brain processes. Yet that threw into view an explanatory gap, as Blavatsky and Besant saw. Earlier in the century, most theorists (for instance Carpenter, Cobbe) explained mental phenomena like free will, moral agency, and subjective experience by attributing them to our souls in interaction with physiological processes in our brains, senses, and nervous systems. Once the soul was stripped away, the insufficiency of the latter processes, described in scientific and objective terms, to explain the subjective quality of mental phenomena was laid bare. It turned out, in retrospect, that the idea of the soul *had* been doing work after all.

However, for Blavatsky, the above insufficiency did not justify a renewed dualist appeal to separate souls in addition to matter. Rather, it justified a new monism of the mental, in which matter is all along a diminished, involuted version of primal mind. For on this basis we can explain how matter gives rise to the (derivative, secondary) forms of mind found in human individuals, as part of the cosmic process whereby the primal mind returns to itself. For the Theosophists, then, panpsychism provided the right response to the explanatory gap.

The dialectic, then, is this. The more ground was conceded to physiology, the less work remained for the soul to do, leaving ever-diminishing reasons to believe in it at all. Yet the more comprehensively materialism promised to account for the mind and the more robustly it drove dualism out of the field, the more this exposed explanatory limits on materialism's part. This convinced the Theosophists of the need to move beyond materialism in turn, but, since dualism had been surpassed, that move must be onwards to something new: panpsychism.

This dialectic emerges from our external comparison of these four women's views; but it was also grasped and followed out by Besant, as she moved from Cobbe's dualist theism through Naden-style materialist atheism to Blavatsky's pantheist panpsychism. She

aligned herself with these other women at each step along the way. Besant has often been portrayed, rather pejoratively, as an intellectual shape-shifter. Yet, we can now see, she was actually following out the dialectical dynamic that interconnects the views of mind endorsed by the other three women. By reconstructing these views and their interplay, I hope to have shown not only that these women's views deserve recognition and examination but also that they can be profitably considered together, as part of a history of women's collective conversation and contestation about the mind.⁴⁷

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¹ It is relatively rare for historical work on past women philosophers to look at these women’s relations to one another rather than to their male contemporaries. However, see Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*; Broad both compares the ideas of early modern women and traces some ways they influenced and reacted against one another.

² O’Neill, “Disappearing Ink.”

³ History of nineteenth-century philosophy concentrates on the post-Kantian Continental tradition. One reason for the neglect of nineteenth-century British philosophy emerges in this

article. For much of the nineteenth century, British philosophical discussion occurred in a generalist culture, not sharply demarcated from psychology, theology, political thought, or other cognate fields. When philosophy became a specialist discipline later in the century, it defined itself against the earlier generalist culture. Consequently, many previously influential figures—like George Henry Lewes (George Eliot's partner), who never held an academic position but was a prolific journal contributor and amateur scientist—became omitted from the nascent discipline. Thus, much nineteenth-century philosophy became invisible to the new profession, a pattern that has continued since and that significantly affected women, as shown here.

⁴ Young, *Darwin's Metaphor*, 125.

⁵ On Cobbe's prominence in Victorian periodicals, see Hamilton, *Frances Power Cobbe*.

⁶ Cobbe, "Magnanimous Atheism" (1877).

⁷ Cobbe, "Faithless World" (1884). That Cobbe was partly responding here to Besant's then secularism is documented in Besant's *Autobiographical Sketches*. Besant's savage reply to Cobbe was "A World Without God" (1885).

⁸ Anonymous, "Mrs Annie Besant," 4.

⁹ Agnosticism, atheism, and secularism were not clearly differentiated at the time, but formed a group of allied positions; see Lightman, "Huxley."

¹⁰ Hanbury Mackay, "A Journal of Her Own," 324.

¹¹ Despite the name 'hylo-idealism' the position turns on materialism about the mind, as we will see.

¹² Over the British nineteenth century, what was initially a fairly unified journal culture diversified and fragmented. Earlier on, newspaper-like weeklies ran alongside heavyweight, more reflective quarterlies like the *Westminster Review* (founded 1824) and *Edinburgh Review* (founded 1802), which last established the position of the cultural critic (Ferris,

“Edinburgh Review”). In 1859 and 1860 came the new monthlies, *Macmillan’s* and *Cornhill*; *Macmillan’s* was more intellectual, closer in character to the quarterlies (see Hughes, “Monthly Magazines”). From the 1870s, specialist journals were founded while, simultaneously, shorter-lived, ‘alternative’ journals such as Besant’s *Our Corner* proliferated. On all this, see Brake and Demoer, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*.

¹³ To be sure, professional philosophers were often interested in spiritualism and belonged to the Society for Psychical Research; and it was from spiritualism that Blavatsky moved on to Theosophy. Still, disinterested investigation of ‘psy’ phenomena was at several removes from the occultist, esoteric milieu in which Theosophy flourished.

¹⁴ For example, Blavatsky gave *The Secret Doctrine* the subtitle *The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy* (my emphasis).

¹⁵ Sidgwick, “Review of Cobbe,” 231.

¹⁶ Torgersen, “Harriet Martineau,” 135.

¹⁷ Reed, *Soul to Mind*, 3.

¹⁸ I do not mean to endorse the once-common view that the British nineteenth century saw science progressively ‘triumphing’ over religion. Science/religion relations were more complicated than that. For instance, many authors interpreted Darwinian evolution as compatible with Christian doctrine. Nonetheless, relatively speaking, the 1870s and 1880s saw a new militancy from some scientists and scientific advocates—as manifest, for example, when John Tyndall declared in 1874 that scientists “claim, and . . . shall wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory” (Tyndall, “Belfast Address,” 530); in the rise of organized secularism; and in the hylo-idealists’ strident atheism. On this shift see also Lightman, “Tyndall’s Address.”

¹⁹ On Besant’s complicated intellectual trajectory, see Bevir, “Besant’s Quest.” Besant does not specify which theistic writings by Cobbe she especially liked, but a probable candidate is

Cobbe's much-admired 1866 "Preface" to the *Collected Works of Theodore Parker* (the American transcendentalist Unitarian minister), a collection that Cobbe edited.

²⁰ Cobbe's journalistic and campaigning activities are analyzed by, amongst others, Caine, Victorian Feminists and Hamilton, *Frances Power Cobbe*. Mitchell's biography *Frances Power Cobbe* is definitive. Peacock's account of the evolution of Cobbe's ethical and religious views is invaluable (Peacock, *Theological and Ethical Writings*), but Peacock considers Cobbe's theory of mind only briefly and misdescribes her as equating the unconscious with the soul (190)—Cobbe's view is the reverse. Bourne Taylor, "Fallacies of Memory," is on Cobbe on memory; while not giving an in-depth examination, Bourne Taylor rightly places Cobbe within the "long history of psychology." Botting, "Gothic Production of the Unconscious," likewise recognises that Cobbe contributed to nineteenth-century British theories of unconscious mind, but his account is very brief and he misdescribes her as a materialist. This is understandable, though, given how much of thinking she concedes to the brain; one 1873 respondent argued that she conceded so much as to make materialism unavoidable, despite herself (Anonymous, "Unconscious Fallacy," 122).

²¹ She refers to his best-selling 1855 book *Kraft und Stoff*. A translation was later produced by none other than Besant (A 262).

²² "Function" is Cobbe's word; Naden uses it too, as did others such as Thomas Henry Huxley who stated in 1886 that "consciousness is a function of the brain" (*Evolution and Ethics*, 135). The word reflects the influence of physiologists, who were analyzing how bodily organs—including the brain—perform characteristic activities (i.e. functions) enabled by their physical structures.

²³ Cobbe implicitly treats mind as the sum-total of cerebral functions (UC 27).

²⁴ Like Cobbe, Carpenter sought to reconcile science and religion by carving out room within the body for an entity he variably classed as soul, mind, and will. Crucially, he also theorized

how the bulk of cerebral activity occurs without consciousness—i.e. without reaching the “sensorium,” in his terms (*Principles of Human Physiology*, ch. 11, part 6, 589ff). His and Cobbe’s differences arose within a largely shared outlook; the differences, which they discussed with one another both in print and private correspondence (Peacock, *Theological and Ethical Writings*, 178, 226), are beyond my purview here, but one deserves note. Carpenter speaks of *cerebration* because for him if a cerebral operation occurs unconsciously or automatically then it cannot count as thought (*Principles of Human Physiology*, 589). Despite retaining the word “cerebration” Cobbe disagreed; Carpenter later noted their continuing disagreement on this (“Physiology of the Will,” 211).

²⁵ Huxley, “Hypothesis,” 240.

²⁶ Reed, *Soul to Mind*, 3.

²⁷ Cobbe, *Essay on Intuitive Morals*, ch. 1.

²⁸ Smith, “Lewins, Naden, and Hylo-Idealism,” 304.

²⁹ Besides Lewins and Naden, the other hylo-idealists were E. Cobham Brewer (pen-named “Julian”), Herbert Courtney, and George McCrie. Lewins, a retired army surgeon, converted first Brewer then Naden, whom he met in 1876. Their subsequent epistolary exchange convinced her to embrace hylo-idealism by 1880. Naden’s efforts advocating hylo-idealism were greatly appreciated by the men: McCrie wrote a laudatory preface to her *Further Reliques*, and Brewer celebrated her version of hylo-idealism in his 1891 pamphlet “Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism: A Critical Study.” The men accepted this young woman as one of them, albeit partly by categorizing Naden as Lewins’ disciple.

³⁰ Naden’s hylo-idealism was discussed in the *Contemporary Review*, *Monist*, and *Journal of Mental Science*. “Hylo-idealism” became enough of a buzz-word that Wilde subtitled his 1887 story “The Canterville Ghost” “A Hylo-Idealistic Romance” (Wilde knew Naden’s

philosophy; see Thain, “Birmingham’s Women Poets,” esp. 22–23). It was largely the hylo-idealists’ immense promotional effort that drew attention to the position.

³¹ Naden has been chiefly remembered for her poetry, on which see, e.g., Alarabi, “Naden’s Philosophical Poetry,” Moore, “Erotics of Evolution,” Thain, “‘Scientific Wooing.’” Only recently have Thain (“Birmingham’s Women Poets”) and, above all, Stainthorp (“Naden: Critical Overview” and *Constance Naden*) recovered Naden as a philosopher and scientist as well as poet. Even Stainthorp does not analyze in detail hylo-idealist’s argumentative structure and tensions.

³² On transcendentalism *versus* immanentism, see Jacyna, “Immanence.”

³³ Barker, “Life and its Basis.”

³⁴ On Naden’s atheism, including in her unpublished notebooks, see Stainthorp, *Constance Naden*, ch. 3.

³⁵ For Naden, Berkeley took Locke’s view of perception to its logical conclusion (*Induction*, 56), establishing that “we perceive nothing but our own sensations” (212). Naden’s further assimilation of Berkeley to Protagoras comes from Lewins (*Life and Mind*, 57), who took it in turn from Lewes (*Biographical History*, 475–76).

³⁶ This criticism came from an anonymous reviewer, “A New Philosophy,” 277–78, Carus, “Monism and Henism,” and Dale, “Naden.”

³⁷ Naden theorized and defended induction in *Induction and Deduction* (1890).

³⁸ Blavatsky referred to “What is Religion?” in *Lucifer* 1.1 (1887), 72.

³⁹ With Darwin, Huxley was Blavatsky’s prime target in *Isis Unveiled* (1877).

⁴⁰ Tyndall, “Belfast Address,” 524.

⁴¹ Lightman, “Tyndall’s Address.”

⁴² Tyndall, “Scientific Materialism,” 420.

⁴³ Cobbe knew Tyndall personally, approving of his argument about the limits of scientific explanation, although thinking *pace* Tyndall that we *should* bring in religion to fill in the gap (Cobbe, *Life*, 2:120–22). Tyndall continued to uphold these limits in the Belfast Address. Despite saying there that he saw in matter the potential for all life, he also said that when we try to trace “upward” the causal genesis of mind from matter we reach a limit: “Man the *object* is separated by an impassable gulf from man the *subject*” (“Belfast Address,” 528).

⁴⁴ On the spiritual status of the primal unity, see Chajes, “Reincarnation,” 75; Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory,” 375–77; and Besant: “the profound difference between Atheism and Pantheism . . . [is that] both posit an Existence . . . of which all phenomena are modes; but to the Atheist that Existence manifests as Force-Matter, unconscious, unintelligent, while to the Pantheist it manifests as Life-Matter, conscious, intelligent. To the one, life and consciousness are attributes, properties, dependent upon arrangements of matter; to the other they are fundamental, essential, and only limited in their manifestation by arrangements of matter” (*A* 146).

⁴⁵ Blavatsky speaks of “Divine Thought . . . Universal Mind,” “ONE LIFE,” and “universal soul” (*SD* 1:1–2), although this “must not be regarded as even vaguely shadowing forth an intellectual process akin to that exhibited by man,” for the latter is finite, discursive, and changeable (*SD* 1:1, note).

⁴⁶ Chajes, “Reincarnation,” 91.

⁴⁷ I thank the referees for their careful, detailed, and helpful comments on earlier versions.