

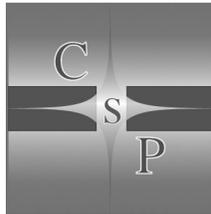
# Behind the Looking Glass



# Behind the Looking Glass

By

Sherry L. Ackerman



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This book is lovingly dedicated to three Philosopher Kings  
who wore the yoke of wisdom advisors to a project that, while  
seeming frivolous to others, was my rite of passage:

Dr. Foster Tait, Professor *Emeritus*, University of South Carolina  
Who gave me the vision to  
peek behind the Looking Glass

Dr. Robert McKay, Professor, Norwich University  
Who patiently read and critiqued  
the first draft

Dr. Daniel A. Kealey, Professor *Emeritus*, Towson University  
Who never even blinked when I told him that,  
thirty three years later,  
I was going back down the Rabbit Hole

“In all of the recent investigation of the Carroll Myth, one area that has been significantly under-represented is Carroll's place in the philosophical traditions of his day. *Behind the Looking Glass* is perhaps the first attempt at correcting that omission.”

Karoline Leach, author of *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll*.

“Ackerman has matched the intellectual, spiritual and political aspects of Carroll in a way that no previous commentator has done. She well may have, in fact, progressed further in an understanding of Carroll than any previous work of this nature. It is not possible to overestimate the value of this book to genuine Carroll scholarship.”

—John Tufail; author of *The Illuminated Snark: An Enquiry into the Relationship between Text and Illustration in ‘The Hunting of the Snark’*.

“Sherry Ackerman takes theosophy, philosophy, and Lewis Carroll each on their own terms and marvelously succeeds in separating fact from fiction. The result is an intriguing and insightful blend of various schools of thought on Carroll--and his and our time--resulting in a rich tapestry that is both a great education and a pleasure to read.”

—Sadi Ranson-Polizzotti; author of *A Bath, Bedside, and Armchair Companion to Lewis Carroll*.

“Sherry Ackerman demonstrates that, like Alice, each of us is a Divine Child or pilgrim soul, unsure of its own nature, seeking entrance into a Garden for which one must use a Golden Key. Masterfully revealing how such questions as “Who am I?” “What is the real nature of space/time?” “How must I fall into the abyss of the ‘Rabbit Hole’ to find my true Self?”, Ackerman shows how Carroll’s masterpiece opens up our narrow, flat mortal world into a metaphysical universe of transcendence and immortality.”

—Judy D. Saltzman, Professor *Emerita* of Philosophy, California Polytechnic State University; author of *Paul Natorp’s Philosophy of Religion within the Marburg Neo-Kantian Tradition*.

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## PREFACE

The following pages are an attempt to explore what I consider to be “curiosities” in the children’s literature of Lewis Carroll. My quest to unearth the philosophical underpinnings of the *Alice* and *Looking Glass* books has had a thirty-three year gestation. I was a graduate student in Philosophy when, for pleasure, I read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The juxtaposition of the *Alice* books with my graduate work raised some questions. Was there something “vaguely philosophical” about the books? Had Carroll hidden other messages behind the frivolity of hookah-smoking caterpillars? Time and circumstances weren’t right in 1973 for me to investigate the problem, but I never stopped wondering about it. Thirty-three years later, the time was right to ask the questions in a serious and scholarly way. This book is the result of that question asking. Although it represents serious scholarship, it is also intended to be fun. Parts of it were written with tongue so in cheek that Lewis Carroll himself might well have chuckled! The scholarship is softly mixed with the kind of academic frivolity that Carroll would have enjoyed...while pointedly directing the reader to Carroll’s vibrant, intentional intellectual spirituality.

The past several years have seen a concentrated move by some newer Carrollian scholars to position Carroll in the theological and philosophical context of his time.<sup>1</sup> This work has had the effect of deconstructing numerous myths that have been, hitherto, unquestioned. My contribution to this movement focuses on the *Alice* and *Sylvie and Bruno* books, looking for suggestions of philosophical content. In doing so, I found, as expected, satirizations and allegorical treatments of several mid-nineteenth century theories of knowledge. My findings, however, went far beyond these initial expectations. I had expected to find Carroll reacting to an advancing tide of empiricism, and I did. I did not, however, expect his reaction to take on the particular shape or substance that it did. My preliminary expectations had been that his reactions would be more conservative and traditional. Where I thought that I would find a

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<sup>1</sup> Most notably, among these scholars, are Pascale Renaud-Grosbras, Hugues Lebaillly, Karoline Leach, John Tufail, Mike Leach and Jenny Woolf.

mathematically based position, I found, instead, a radical religio-philosophical counter-response to patriarchal materialism. To borrow from contemporary jargon, Carroll's personal epistemology took on a *counter-cultural flavor* as he battled to come to grips with the scope and limits of material existence. His intellectual journey, intentionally or otherwise, carried him deep into the waters of mysticism. Nineteenth century currents of spiritualism, theosophy and occult philosophy co-mingled with Carroll's interest in revived Platonism and Neoplatonism. The image of Carroll as a dreary Victorian conservative gave way to that of a man with wide intellectual parameters, an inquiring mind and bold, far-sighted vision. The work, essentially, offers yet another perspective toward the ongoing, contemporary deconstruction of the Carroll Myth. I am interested in both the man behind the myth...and the myths behind the man. Through rigorous philosophical recontextualization, I have attempted to demonstrate that myth, in its most primary sense, was as essential to the de-mythologized Lewis Carroll as it was to Plato.

It is worth noting that every chapter title, as well as that of the book itself, incorporates the word *behind*. This reflects Carroll's deliberation between the words *behind* and *through* when he named his second *Alice* book. Initially, the book was named *Behind the Looking Glass* until Carroll opted to implement John Ruskin's suggestion of changing the word to *through*. Since this point is significant in viewing Carroll's system of ideas, I carried the theme through the chapter titles. The reader should note that whereas the *Alice* books are well-crafted literature, containing philosophical allegory, the *Sylvie and Bruno* books are notably more forthright, with an agenda that is quite obvious, though positioned in a weaker literary vessel.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, turned Lewis Carroll, exemplified the imperatives of Romantic introspection. He sketched and drew, photographed, wrote, sought beauty in nature, lectured in mathematics and logic, was passionate about theatre, was an inquiring theologian and open-mindedly investigated a wide range of phenomenal possibilities. The *Alice* and *Sylvie and Bruno* books provided a unique point of conjunction between his intellect and spirituality. Having lost belief in the theological and mythological master plots of earlier eras, Carroll turned his instinctive hunger for cosmic coherence and existential order toward the imaginative fiction of wonderlands rife with philosophical content.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special acknowledgments are given to the three Philosopher Kings to whom I have dedicated the book. The late Dr. Foster “Scotty” Tait, Professor *Emeritus*, University of South Carolina, was really the inspiration for the book. He lit the flame of inquiry and turned my raw passion for philosophy into a systematic, rigorous search for meaning. I am forever indebted to his insistence upon scholarly discourse, critical methodology and creative visioning. Dr. Robert McKay, Professor of Philosophy, Norwich University, demonstrated the patience of a monk as he read seemingly endless drafts and rewrites of the manuscript. His input was invaluable and substantially shaped the direction of the book. There are so many places in the text where his critique deepened the inquiry and opened possibilities. Dr. Daniel Kealey, Professor *Emeritus*, Towson University, fueled the flames and kept my enthusiasm alive through cold, dark winter nights of writing. He served as editor to the manuscript, and I am especially indebted to his meticulous attention to grammatical detail. I also wish to acknowledge my daughter, Jec A. Ballou and son, Christopher C. Ballou, who were uncomplainingly neglected as Alice became my constant companion. They, somehow, became accustomed to having stacks of books, instead of dinner, on the table more times than not. And, finally, I am grateful to Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, turned Lewis Carroll, for his incredibly productive intellect. The legacy he left the world is impressive and I, for one, have been deeply enriched by it.



## INTRODUCTION

In practical terms, ultimate unification with the divine can be described as a surrendered egoless state in which the external world synchronizes with the mystic's true nature and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

When Oxford mathematical lecturer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson made the metamorphosis into Lewis Carroll, it is unlikely that he had any idea that his *Alice* books would become literary classics. For children who had been confined to the dreary conventionality of Victorian existence, the sweep of his imagination opened the door to a new and fanciful world. Yet, a century-plus after their release, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* still provide playful escape from everyday cares for both children and adults. There is, however, an element in Carroll's imaginative literature that goes beyond mere fantasy—an element that, in Alice's words, is “curiouser and curiouser!”

In a broad sense, the story of philosophical inquiry in England is a history of the changes in view of the structure and foundations of knowledge. When, as a result of the birth of the new sciences, the men of the seventeenth century lost faith in the innate capabilities of the mind, a gradual shift from rationalism toward empiricism took place. The two positions, though fundamentally opposed, were not always mutually exclusive and clear parameters for each were often difficult to define.

The early eighteenth century was dominated by the idea that man, nature and even deity could be explained by Newtonian physics. The validity and reliability of claims to knowledge of the external world through sense perception, as well as the propriety of claims to knowledge beyond the limits of sense perception, were challenged in the attempts to construct a sound theory of knowledge. This conception of natural philosophy, as a body of knowledge based firmly on experienced facts or experiment and observation, had sprung from the scholastic tradition of the thirteenth century, when Albertus Magnus and Aquinas had grafted Aristotle's natural philosophy onto Christian theology. Natural philosophy's emphasis on a body of knowledge based on observation and experimentation prepared the way for the empirical principles of the

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1911), p. 71.

seventeenth century. Further advocacy for the emerging empirical paradigm was supplied by the widespread popularity of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

During this period, Plato had few partisans who were courageous enough to defend him against the ground swell of empiricism. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century there began to be a strong revival of interest in Platonism and Neoplatonism as a result of the earlier influence of the Cambridge School (c.1650-1700), and the work of Thomas Taylor, the Platonist (1758-1835). The influence that the Cambridge School had on the Platonic Renaissance in England cannot be underestimated. Without sympathy, the Cambridge School opposed the advance of science as founded by Galileo and Kepler, since this School saw it as the forerunner of a mechanistic view of nature that violated their ethical and spiritual convictions. The Cambridge Platonists looked upon themselves as the guardians of a religious and philosophical tradition that they attempted to trace, fortify and defend by a thorough acquaintance with, and interpretation of, its sources. In this sense, they were trying to construct an invulnerable foundation for a metaphysical spiritualism. In the history of English philosophy, empiricism occupied the focus of attention and the Cambridge School was "granted an historical significance only in so far as it had co-operated, as rival and adversary, in the formation of the empirical philosophy, and produced in it certain polemical reactions."<sup>2</sup> However, the real intellectual principles that Cambridge Platonism stood for bound it to the past through the philosophical movement of the Italian and English Renaissance, and to the future in the general history of thought for ensuing centuries.

Albeit the Cambridge Platonists appeal to and venerate Plato, their achievements were by no means the direct continuation of Platonic thought. Many essential phases of Platonism never enter into their view, while other features of the thought are so greatly modified that they are scarcely recognizable. "In these writers the teachings of Plato always appear as if they were transformed through a refracting medium."<sup>3</sup> The Cambridge Circle drew heavily upon the interpretation of Platonic philosophy offered by Marsilio Ficino and the Florentine Academy. For Cudworth and More<sup>4</sup>, as for Ficino<sup>5</sup> and Pico della Mirandola<sup>6</sup>, Plato

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1953), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> The Cambridge Platonists were a group of English seventeenth-century thinkers associated with the University of Cambridge. The most important philosophers among them were Ralph Cudworth (1617-1689) and Henry More (1614-1687).

formed a link in the golden chain of divine revelation. Plato, the ancestor and patron of the *philosophia perennis*<sup>7</sup>, was for them the living proof that true philosophy is never opposed to genuine theology.

In 1881, Thomas M. Johnson wrote an article, *The Way and the Wisdom Teachers*, for *The Platonist*, I in which he traced the gradual progression from Platonic idealism toward nineteenth century England's interest in theosophy and spiritualism. He cited that reactions created by the cold, barren dogmas of modern science had served as catalysts for a revival in the mystical beliefs of Platonism, Neoplatonism and Pythagoreanism. Johnson's reference would certainly have included the work of Thomas Taylor, the Platonist. Taylor continued along the lines initiated by the Cambridge School in his denunciation of eighteenth century deism as "the experimental farrago of the moderns" and declared that "the long lost philosophy of Pythagoras and Plato" were infinitely superior to it.<sup>8</sup> He further asserted that Plato was the greatest link in a chain of transmitters of a philosophy first promulgated by Orpheus, then by Pythagoras. Plato, according to Taylor, concealed in obscurity from the vulgar and ignorant the most sublime of his doctrines. These were the teachings, in short, of the ancient mystery schools. The meanings lay hidden for years until the appearance of the Alexandrians. Men such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syriacus, Proclus, Hierocles, Sallust and Damascius freed the mystical doctrines of Plato from obscurity. Taylor's interpretations of the ancient doctrines fueled the interest in ancient mystery teachings that was growing in nineteenth century England. Evidence of this influence was being seen in the Romantics' emphasis on the truths buried in literary symbol, allegory and myth. Many of the poets, writers and artists of this period held that Plato and his followers concealed divine truths in allegory and ambiguity. Several of the

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<sup>5</sup> Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the Florentine, was a man who wrought a deep and lasting change in European society. From him and his Academy, the Renaissance drew its most potent intellectual and spiritual inspiration. To Ficino, the writings of Plato and his followers contained the key to the most important knowledge for man: knowledge of him/herself, that is, knowledge of the divine and immortal principle within him/her. See Plato, *Timaeus*, 41; *Phaedrus*, 245c-246a.

<sup>6</sup> Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), an Italian Neoplatonist and student of Marsilio Ficino, who was interested in positing a reconciliation between religion and philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent resource on the *philosophia perennis*, see *The Perennial Philosophy*, by Aldous Huxley (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945).

<sup>8</sup> George Mills Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 11.

Romantics, among the most prominent of whom is Blake, not only accounted for the enigmas in the writing of the ancients by the doctrine of intentional obscurity, but accepted it as a fundamental aesthetic principal in their own work.

In addition to the Cambridge School and Taylor's interpretations, Plato's teachings had also undergone other modifications and transmutations that had inevitably occurred as they had filtered through the various perspectives of the subsequent schools. Some philosophical elements that formed Middle Platonism, the period between the Old Academy and the Neoplatonists, had become primary components of Gnosticism. Although Gnosticism emerged as a set of transformations belonging to a multidimensional, variable system, there were two criteria that were generally found. One was the criterion of *ecosystemic intelligence*, which is the degree to which the universe can be attributed to an intelligent and good cause. The other criterion was the *anthropic principle*, which is the affirmation of the commensurability and mutual link between human beings and the universe at large.<sup>9</sup> The basic Gnostic myth is that the creator described in Genesis is not the true god, but an inferior Demiurge. The Demiurge has many ministers, or archons, and together they are responsible for the miserable world. Though imprisoned in matter, humanity carries within itself the leftover sparks of the Pleroma (Fullness) that existed before the Demiurge and his creation. Our bodies and souls cloak this spiritual spark and must be rent for us to discover our true being.

The corpus of Greek writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus and often quoted as the *Poimandres* is also regarded as a prime document of independent pagan Gnosticism. Therefore, concurrent with Victorian England's revival of interest in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, we see a resurgence of Gnostic themes in literature from the period. To the poet, writer or artist of Romantic or mystical temperament, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism walked hand-in-hand, teaching that there is a realm of Beauty beyond the sensible world which is perceptible to the mind. Carroll's own Christ Church colleague, J.A. Stewart, in *Platonism in English Poetry*, wrote:

Platonism, I would describe, in the most general terms, as the mood of one who has a curious eye for the endless variety of this visible and temporal world and a fine sense of its beauties, yet is haunted by the presence of an invisible and eternal world behind, or, when the mood is most pressing,

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<sup>9</sup> Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 71.

within, the visible and temporal world, and sustaining both it and himself—a world not perceived as external to himself, but inwardly, lived by him, as that with which, at moments of ecstasy, or even habitually, he is become One.<sup>10</sup>

The substantive teachings of the ancient Greek mystery schools were reinforced in nineteenth century England through the growing popularity of the Theosophical Movement. Theosophical teachings connected the dots between ancient mystery schools and nineteenth century fraternal orders.<sup>11</sup> An article from *Theosophy*, dated March 5, 1939, asks “how many realize that *no initiated* philosopher had the right to reveal his knowledge clearly, but was obliged by the law of the sanctuary to conceal the truth under the veil of allegory or symbol?” Roger Bacon, centuries earlier, in *Wisdom of Keeping Secrets* (c.1260), had similarly written, “a man is crazy who writes a secret unless he conceals it from a crowd and leaves it so that it can be understood only by effort of the studious and wise.” Lewis Carroll was not a crazy man.....and he did a masterful job of concealing his secrets from the crowd.

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<sup>10</sup> John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists* (London: Kyle Cathie Ltd., 1991), 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Theosophy*, Vol. 27, No. 4, February, 1939

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE MYTHS BEHIND THE MAKER

Ever drifting down the stream-  
Lingering in the golden gleam-  
Life, what is it but a dream?

*Through the Looking Glass*

Is all our Life, then, but a dream  
Seen faintly in the golden gleam  
Athwart Time's dark resistless stream?  
*Sylvie and Bruno*

The world is but a Thought, said he:  
The vast unfathomable sea  
Is but a Notion—unto me.

*Rhyme? And Reason?*

The one constant pertaining to mythic characters is that their life stories transcend objectivity. Whether we take as our example Dionysus, Persephone...or Lewis Carroll...the fact remains that historical impressions are dominated by subjective claims to truth. Biographies of Carroll conspicuously lack consensus in their attempts to construct an objective biographical persona.<sup>1</sup> The essence of myth is exemplified in these conflicting accounts. Myth doesn't exist objectively apart from the myth-makers and, as such, represents a subjective relationship between the story teller and an archetype. This being so, we might be well advised to look at Carroll from an archetypal, as opposed to purely biographical, perspective. In choosing this lens, my claims regarding Carroll should be considered from the basis of coherence<sup>2</sup>, rather than correspondence<sup>3</sup>, theory.

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<sup>1</sup> See *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll*, by Karoline Leach (London: Peter Owens Publishing, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> A coherence theory of truth states that the truth of any proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions.

What might be found in the content of an archetypal nineteenth-century Romantic? In short...a life exemplifying the Platonic imperative toward The Good, The Beautiful and The True. Platonism, well stirred into a mix of Neoplatonism and Pythagoreanism, represented one of the central currents of the intellectual climate in nineteenth-century England. In the Allegory of the Cave<sup>4</sup>, Plato offered an insight into why philosophers have the possibility to attain happiness, whereas non-philosophers do not. Non-philosophers are like the prisoners in the cave, content to believe that mere images are reality. The philosopher leaves the cave and moves beyond the images of things to things themselves, then onto the world of the Forms and, finally, to The Good itself. The myth ends with the philosopher returning to the cave in an attempt to enlighten his fellow prisoners. It could be said that Lewis Carroll both left, and returned, to the cave. Drawing, sketching, and photographing images moved him toward things themselves. Long walks in the countryside, afternoon tea parties with children, *a priori* mathematical and logical truths revealed things themselves, forming a springboard into the world of The Forms. We see this principle illustrated in the Cult of Childhood that was glorified in so much of the literature and art of the Victorian period. The adoration of children as good, innocent and in some way connected with spirituality, had been reintroduced from the Orphic theogony into British Romanticism. It could, thus, be suggested that Lewis Carroll's return to the cave, playing on the Cult of Childhood, was a deliberate attempt to enlighten the imprisoned through his carefully crafted stories of liberation.

The Platonic dialogues are rich in discussions of The Beautiful. In the *Symposium*<sup>5</sup>, for example, Plato presents a progression toward The Beautiful, outlining five distinct stages of ascent, as follows:

- (1) It is the longing for what one lacks that propels one through the ascent. Since we exist in the sensible world, we begin by being attracted to a beautiful body. We eventually realize that the very thing which makes this particular body beautiful is found in all beautiful bodies.
- (2) One then comes to realize that a beautiful soul is even more lovely than a beautiful body, causing one to love all beautiful souls, even if they are in unattractive bodies.

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<sup>3</sup> A correspondence theory of truth states that the truth conditions of propositions are objective features in the world.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 514a-515b.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-211b.

(3) This leads one to contemplate the beauty of a harmonious social order, since beautiful souls can only blossom in orderly and just political communities.

(4) One then moves to the realm of the sciences, which provide the foundations for the harmonious social order—a social order founded upon true knowledge (*episteme*) rather than mere opinion (*doxa*).

(5) The final stage of our ascent is impossible to explain to those who have not experienced it themselves. It can be described as the mystical vision of The Beautiful, which for Plato, as we shall see a bit later on, is actually the same as The Good. This experience, which is described in ecstatic language, comes close to the mystical vision of God described by Christian authors in the Middle Ages. Unlike the other kinds of beauty that we have seen, the vision of The Beautiful is a glimpse of something transcendent and eternal and causes delight in those who experience it.

Plato maintained that all human beings long to possess The Beautiful/Good, for it is the very nature of our being to seek Truth. If we are satisfied to be confined to material reality, we will never be fulfilled. It is incumbent upon those who have attained the vision of The Beautiful/Good to lead us beyond the material realm into the realm of The Forms. Carroll found himself in the intellectual storm-center of England. Materialism was gaining ground at Oxford. The Commissioner's Report on Educational Reform at Oxford (April 1852) emphatically demanded that science should receive fair play. Traditional theological issues took a back seat to a wider variety of philosophical concerns in College Common Room discussions. Mark Pattison was said to have boasted that "German philosophy superseded the Fathers."<sup>6</sup> The Ashmolean museum was a visible sign that clerical Oxford had opened her gates to the advancing tide of science. Many Oxford dons were apprehensive that this tide might diffuse the value of philosophy, history, language and religion. Thomas Hill Green, erstwhile, was making his powers felt, in his teachings of philosophy at Balliol, as an example of the thoughtful liberals of the era. Another corruptive catalyst was the empiricist philosophy of John Stuart Mill, whose works attained enormous prestige at Cambridge and throughout England. The dominant theme of Mills *Logic* (1843) was that the only legitimate source of information man had about the world was the physical senses; conversely, faith was not a valid foundation for belief.

The clash between the advancing tide of empiricism and the old traditional values of the High Church came to a climax with the *Essays and Reviews* controversy. The failure of many Anglican hierarchy to

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, vol. 3 (London: Methuen Co., Ltd, 1927), 354.

repudiate the higher critics and radical freethinkers scandalized the Evangelicals, whose outraged response was considered reactionary by the scholarly community. In 1861, *Essays and Reviews*, co-authored by Jowett, Pattison, Baden-Powell, Temple and Goodwin, expressed alarm lest, “the majority of Churchmen, by holding fast the narrow, fundamental beliefs, should estrange themselves more and more from contemporary thought.”<sup>7</sup> In this volume the Essayists allegorized their theological position by stating that if a ship’s company were to claim that they had seen a mermaid, surely no-one would believe them. Whereas, if this same company were to claim that they saw something that they believed to be a mermaid, it would be easily conceded. Mark Pattison cited this example in urging Churchmen to allow supremacy of reason to prevail through all religious thinking. Jowett maintained, “Scripture must be interpreted like any other book....”<sup>8</sup> Oxford, the English Church and the country as a whole were fiercely divided on the question of reason versus doctrine.

At this time, Archdeacon Wilberforce offered a counter-position to *Essays and Reviews* in his *Replies to Essays and Reviews*. In the preface he denounced the rationalist movement as a “daring claim for the unassisted human intellect to be able to measure and explain all things.” Lewis Carroll shared the Archdeacon’s position. Carroll’s study of mathematics had convinced him that there were limits to the human intellect. We find evidence of Carroll’s position on the faculty of human reason in a letter that he wrote to Daniel Biddle, mathematical editor of the *Educational Times*. In the letter, Carroll interprets Zeno’s second paradox as the response to Biddle’s question involving infinite regress of ever-diminishing distances. Carroll states that we cannot conceive how a point, moving from “0” to “1”, through an infinite series of steps, ever reaches “1”, but that a thing is not impossible merely because it is inconceivable.<sup>9</sup> The limitations of human reason do, thus, not limit the possibility of the reality of unknown phenomenon.

The already frail faith of many in the established Church was further eroded by the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). The time was ripe for great collisions of principles and aims. Just as Archdeacon Wilberforce had been outspoken in a reply to the Essayists, legend has it that he also agreed to debate Thomas Henry Huxley over

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred William Benn, *The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychological Research* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Morton N. Cohen and Roger Lancelyn Green, eds. *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*: vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 589.

Darwin's claims that man descended from "ape, as opposed to angel." The apparent debate that ensued between Wilberforce and Huxley (1860) gave the superficial impression of being about doctrinal issues. However, it is just as likely that Wilberforce's primary incentive in attacking Darwin's theory, as it had been in countering the Essayists, was to refute materialism. The proponents of self-evident truths and *a priori* knowledge were faced with evaluating and determining the causes for religion, and of the issues raised by these debates. Theology had ceased in its supreme reign, but the instincts that produced it had not ceased to stir inquiry. Carroll allied with Wilberforce in his position on both the Essayists and the Evolutionists. It has been noted that Carroll could not mention Darwin without bitterness. After endeavoring to arrive at some conclusions as to the message of the Christian doctrines from the expositions of contemporary scholars and theologians, forever in dispute with one another, Carroll found himself outside the rigidly Anglican system.<sup>10</sup> Carroll, like the Wilberforces, had become interested in immaterial phenomenon and direct spiritual experience (*gnosis*).

Both Carroll and the Wilberforces, albeit Anglican clergymen, were active participants in the theosophical movement that was spreading through Victorian England. Basil Wilberforce made his theosophical interests public with the publication of *Mystic Immanence*, in which he stated that the essence of the ancient gnosis was the oneness of the human soul with the Universal Soul.<sup>11</sup> Carroll's theosophical and spiritualist interests are documented through his membership in the Society for Psychical Research and the Ashmolean Society, as well as in his private library holdings. Alan Gauld, author of *The Founders of Psychical Research*, estimated that, in England, by the 1860's and 70's, "...the existence of four fairly successful periodicals suggest that the number of active Spiritualists must have been well into five figures. The numbers of those influenced by Spiritualism, or at least interested in it, may have been perhaps ten times greater.<sup>12</sup> The Society for Psychical Research was founded in February 1882 and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's name appears in the charter list of members, along with William Gladstone, Arthur Balfour, Alfred Tennyson and John Ruskin, dated 1883. Further, at the time of Carroll's death, numerous books on the subject were listed in the estate catalogue including Home's *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*,

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<sup>10</sup> Although Dodgson/Carroll had served as an Anglican Deacon, it is notable that he declined to proceed to Holy Orders.

<sup>11</sup> William Kingsley, *The Gnosis or Ancient Wisdom in the Christian Scriptures* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1937), 57.

<sup>12</sup> Gauld, *Founders of Psychical Research*, 77.

Thomson's *Philosophy of Magic*, Christmas' *Phantom World* and numerous books on the occult, among which was Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*.<sup>13</sup> Further evidence of Carroll's theosophical associations are found in the documentation that he lectured to a meeting of the Ashmolean Society (November 1860) on the topic "Where does the day begin?"<sup>14</sup> The Ashmolean Society was founded by Elias Ashmole, an English mystic, for the purposes of reconstructing ancient Platonic and Gnostic mysticism.<sup>15</sup>

The foundation for a modern Spiritualist movement had been put in place through the enterprises of three eccentrics. Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish engineer turned prophet, who communicated with angels and spirits, had published *Arcana Coelestia* in London in 1749; Franz Mesmer, an Austrian physician branded unacceptable by the world of learning, popularized the idea of trance and the concept of animal magnetism (c. 1775), and Andrew Jackson Davis, a young American good-for-nothing who took to seeing visions, became the first theorist of the Spiritualist movement through the publication in 1847 of his channeled work, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations*.<sup>16</sup> The crisis of consciousness that overtook nineteenth century England could be likened to the cultural adjustment of the Renaissance period.

What was happening was the final collapse of the old world-order which had first been rudely assaulted during the Renaissance and Reformation...just when the Age of Reason seemed to be bearing fruit in the nineteenth century, there was an unexpected reaction against the very method which brought success, a wild return to archaic forms of belief, and among the intelligentsia a sinister concentration on superstitions which had been thought buried....<sup>17</sup>

Bereft of assurances of immortality after so great an attack on biblical revelation were masses of hopeless people begging for a revelation that was scientifically demonstrable. Ensuing was a widespread flight from

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander L. Taylor, *The White Knight: A Study of C.L. Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)* (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1963), 179.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (New York: The Century Co., 1898), 85.

<sup>15</sup> Manly P. Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to the Study and Application of Rational Procedure* (Los Angeles: The Hall Publishing Co., 1929), 411.

<sup>16</sup> James Webb, *The Occult Underground*, (Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1974), 21-26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

reason and a revival of occult traditions that had been discredited in the Enlightenment.

Interestingly, the original version of *Alice*, begun in 1862, did not contain the Cheshire Cat, the Pig and Pepper, or the Mad Tea Party, and contained only a very abbreviated trial of the Knave of Hearts. These additions occurred during the re-working of the manuscript, between 1862 to 1865, while Oxford, the English Church and the country as a whole were fiercely divided on the religio-philosophical questions of doctrine versus reason. During this period, Carroll read Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies* and found all of the questions of the day "neatly wrapped up," as Kingsley said, in allegory and satire.<sup>18</sup> Considerations of evolution, spiritualism and materialism were set into the enlivened "nonsense" of *Water Babies*, and probably encouraged Carroll to introduce more allegory and satire into his developing *Alice* manuscript.

There are a number of similarities between Carroll's works and Kingsley's *Water Babies*. Notably, both authors allegorize problems of perception and their subsequent moral implications. Kingsley and Carroll were both interested in psychic research and its implications for perception. Carroll, in fact, makes a direct reference to this in the Introduction to *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. In the period from 1868 to 1876, Carroll's interest in psychic research escalated. In a letter to James Langton Clarke (December 4, 1882) Carroll wrote:

I have just read a small pamphlet, the first report of the Psychical Society, on 'thought-reading.' The evidence, which seems to have been most carefully taken...seems to point to the existence of a natural force, allied to electricity and nerve-force, by which brain can act on brain. I think we are close on the day when this shall be classed among the known natural forces, and its laws tabulated, and when the scientific skeptics, who always shut their eyes, till the last moment, to any evidence that seems to point beyond materialism, will have to accept it as a proven fact in nature.<sup>19</sup>

Here, it appears that Carroll is entertaining the epistemological question of whether or not it is possible to receive impressions from the mind of an agent by some means other than the ordinary senses. This line of inquiry is extended to ask if those impressions are received, on the other hand, from slight sensory indications unintentionally and unconsciously conveyed to them by the agent. While Carroll admittedly recognized a standard of normal perception, he also allowed that the acuteness with which different

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *White Knight*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen and Green, *Letters*, vol. 1, 471-2.

individuals perceive sensation could certainly pass through a wide scale of variation. For example, while one person may not be able to distinguish even primary colors, there are tribal weavers in Eastern Asia who can distinguish with certainty over three-hundred shades of a single color which are entirely indistinguishable to ordinary Western eyes.<sup>20</sup> This idea gives objective reality to an immense body of knowledge that is contrary to materialism. In this case, we find an example where ordinary sensory experience is unsatisfactory for providing consistently reliable public perceptions. To alleviate this problem, Carroll might have suggested that the methods for obtaining knowledge be broadened to include gnosis, or the experience of Pure Thought. The possibility for this sentiment is suggested in Carroll's *Rhyme and Reason*:

“The world is but a Thought”, said he:  
 The vast unfathomable sea  
 Is but a Notion—unto me.

In this passage, “Thought” is assigned a capital “T,” a mystical short-hand for referencing the product of Universal Mind. The position is developed further when he continues:

Thought in the mind doth still abide:  
 That is by Intellect supplied,  
 And within that Idea doth hide:  
 And he, that yearns the truth to know,  
 Still further inwardly may go,  
 And find Idea from Notion flow:  
 And thus the chain, that sages wrought  
 For Notion hath its source in Thought.

Here, “Thought,” “Intellect” and “Idea” are all capitalized, again suggesting that he is alluding to Universal Principles. Likewise, the verse continues, “Notion hath its source in Thought,” indicating that even what appear to be our individual, or particular, notions are a part of Source. “Thought in the mind doth still abide: That is by Intellect supplied, And within that Idea doth hide,” gives credence to gnosis. Carroll hints that the Idea is already present in the Intellect, dormant, waiting to be awakened by Thought. “And he, that yearns to know the truth, Still further inwardly may go,” suggests that truth can be found by taking the inward journey of the mystic. Carroll strengthens this suggestion in the next line as he states,

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<sup>20</sup> R. Osgood Mason, *Telepathy and the Subliminal Self* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1899), 74.

“And find Idea from Notion flow.” Whereas a “notion” is a whim or fancy of the mind, while an “idea” is a more clearly defined image existing in the mind; the capitalization of both words intimates that Carroll is signifying that they are not particular, but Universal, qualities. Thus, an Idea can be arrived at by a process initiated by considering, or contemplating, the Notion. Carroll goes on to assert, “And thus the chain, that sages sought, Is to a glorious circle wrought, For Notion has its source in Thought.” In these verses, he introduces the Platonic concept of Thought as timeless and continuous, without beginning or end. Likewise, he implies Platonic dualism, as both Notion and Idea, participants in both the phenomenal and noumenal realms, initiate and conclude in Thought. Finally, his allegorical reference to Platonism, “...the chain, that sages sought,” echoing Thomas Taylor’s assertion that Plato was the greatest link in a chain of transmitters of a philosophy first promulgated by Orpheus, then by Pythagoras.<sup>21</sup>

The conceptual world of Platonism offered a viable alternative to the empiricism that was sweeping Victorian England. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Platonism was the concept of philosophical realism. *Realism* refers to the notion that all words denote objects that have independent existence apart from the mind that creates language. If a word exists, then something denoted by that word also exists. Abstractions, therefore, have reality outside of language and beyond their function as conveniences of human thought. What we are inclined to dismiss as the fallacy of conceptual reification—treating conceptual tools as though they were objectified things—is commonplace in Platonism, indeed, essential to its whole approach to thinking. Therefore, for example, just as there are things—Mad Hatters—that correspond to the words *Mad Hatter*, so there is a thing—*redness*—that corresponds to the word *red*.

A second essential and, to materialistic ways of thinking, extremely odd characteristic of a Platonic framework, is the notion that there are degrees of reality. From an empirical standpoint, something is either real or it is not. In Platonism, everything possesses some degree of reality, and that degree can range from almost complete non-being to full being, from the very minimum degree of reality that can be present for something to exist at all to complete reality. Different positions, in the hierarchy of reality, are assigned to different things. Further, what materialism is inclined to think of as the best candidates for the highest positions in the

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Taylor, *A Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1875), p. 47.

hierarchy of realities would, in fact, occupy the lower positions. Whereas the materialist would consider concrete objects as the most unquestionably real entities we confront, abstractions and invisible entities would be problematic. In Platonism, however, the presuppositions are reversed: disembodied abstractions possess the highest degree of reality; concrete, material objects have considerably less. *Mad Hatter-ness* is more real than a particular *Mad Hatter* that we might encounter in the phenomenal world. *Redness* is more real than any particular sense experience involving the seeing of *red* objects. Indeed, the particular *Mad Hatter* or the particular experience of *red* is real only to the extent to which it participates in *Mad Hatter-ness* or *redness*. Participation is bound up in still another important characteristic of Platonism, which is its insistent dualism.

Platonic frameworks draw a dividing line between the two realms of existence. One realm, the inferior of the two, is the material, physical world of sense experience. It is the phenomenal world, the world of objects, of the body and of immediate perception. The other, the superior of the two, is the world of the immaterial world of realities not accessible to the body's senses. It is the world known by intellect or spiritual sense, the noumenal world. The noumenal world contains the Universals. Although Platonism is decidedly dualistic in its vision of two realms, it is paradoxically monistic in its notions regarding the relationships among the highest entities existing in the noumenal realm of ideas. The Good, The True and The Beautiful are actually all one Universal, being apparently separated for the sake of the limited intellect and perceptual faculties of ordinary human beings. The Good is The True, which is The Beautiful. In this sense, The Good, The True, and The Beautiful are never dissonant because the Universals, being in fact one and the same, cannot be in conflict. The name given to the one encompassing Universal varies greatly. Sometimes it is called The One, sometimes The Absolute. Often, the expression The Good denotes both the partial, moral aspect of The One and The One Itself. In other words, all of the principal Universals resolve into The One.

Human nature combines a material element—the body and its senses—and a noumenal element—the mind and spirit. *Mind* in Platonism is far more inclusive an entity than merely the rational or intellectual component. *Mind* includes all that enables us to make contact with invisible realities, both within ourselves and outside ourselves. The material aspect of human nature is constructed out of phenomenal matter and is, therefore, subject to all of the limitations and liabilities of the phenomenal world. The noumenal aspect of human nature originates, of course, in the noumenal world and, therefore, participates in its power and

excellence. Since, however, *Mind* is entrapped in a material container that is located within the phenomenal world at some distance from the noumenal--*exiled in a distant country* is a common metaphor--its power and excellence are obscured and impaired. The consummation of this discipline, of this "homeward journey out of exile" is conceived of as a transformation of the soul of the human being.

Nineteenth century Platonists were influenced by the Italian Renaissance philosopher Nicholas Cusanus, who developed a rich and complex view of the universe and human knowledge. Among his most important and far-reaching ideas was the idea that mathematical knowledge was always absolutely certain knowledge. They were also heavily influenced by the Renaissance Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino, who believed that the purpose of human life was contemplation. The ultimate goal of human life was to be reunited with God, at least in an intellectual sense. This goal, according to Ficino, was accomplished through contemplation (*theoria*). At first, the human mind removes itself from the outside, physical world, and thinks about abstract ideas concerning knowledge and the soul. As it rises in knowledge it eventually reaches a point where it can arrive at an unmediated vision of God itself. This last stage would occur only after death and the immortality that the soul would enjoy would be an eternity of this vision of God. From this idea, Ficino developed the concept that he called Platonic Love, which had significant implications during the Victorian Period in England. While Ficino believed that the human soul pursued contemplation more or less in isolation, he acknowledged that human beings were fundamentally social. When the spiritual relationship between God and the individual, sought through contemplation, is reproduced in a friendship or love with another person, that constitutes spiritual or Platonic Love. In other words, when the love and spiritual activity in a friendship mirrors the love for God, then the two individuals have attained the highest type of friendship that they can.

The two most influential aspects of Platonism and Neoplatonism for Lewis Carroll, as we shall see, were its emphasis on the priority and certainty of mathematics and Ficino's doctrine of Platonic Love. As the concept of Platonic Love diffused Victorian England's artistic and intellectual circles, writers, poets, philosophers and artists began associating erotic love with spiritual bonds, as reflective of the relationship between individuals and God. Likewise, the Platonic argument that mathematics was a form of certain knowledge got expanded to the radical thesis that mathematics represented the divine ideas. This extreme position, accepted by the bulk of the Neoplatonists, eventually

became the basis for a new form of science. Whereas science had historically been dominated by purely qualitative, empirical claims, the new view asserted that the physical world was fundamentally mathematical. Thus, knowledge of mathematics was a requisite for preliminary access to the divine mind.

From this perspective, Carroll would not have found complete compatibility with the doctrine, for example, of Francis Bacon.<sup>22</sup> Bacon sharply divided knowledge into Inspired Divinity and Philosophy. He based his division on the idea that all knowledge was ultimately derived from one of two sources. It could be “inspired by divine revelation” or it could “arise from our senses.” Apart from revelation all human knowledge arose from the senses. Bacon could not reconcile with the concept of pure reason, and felt that such a method was like a spider making cobwebs out of its own substance. He objected to allowing consideration of theological issues in the study of natural philosophy. He was annoyed when philosophers, in searching for the causes of natural phenomena, would think in terms of divine purposes rather than more immediately in terms of other natural phenomena. Alluding to number mysticism and the Theory of Forms, Bacon mentions that Pythagoras and Plato mistakenly felt that natural science had its basis in revelation.<sup>23</sup> Bacon’s sharp mandatory division between philosophy and theology was diametrically opposed to Platonism and, as such, received a share of Carroll’s satire.

Carrollian satire was also targeted at Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision* (1709) and Newman’s *Tract XC* (1841), both of which questioned the validity of Euclidean geometry. In *Tract XC*, Newman found a weakness in the Thirty-Nine Articles and in the whole fabric on which the mathematical orthodoxy of the nineteenth century had been founded. “The truth is,” he wrote, “we do not at all know what is meant by distance or intervals absolutely any more than we know what is meant by absolute time.”<sup>24</sup> Berkeley, earlier, had laid the foundation for Newman’s view by stating that an intelligence, with a sense of vision but no sense of touch, would be unable to imagine a solid object, or prove the congruence of triangles, or even imagine a plane figure, since this would require the idea of distance.

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<sup>22</sup> Bacon contended that the only knowledge of importance to man was empirically rooted in the natural world and that a clear system of scientific inquiry would assure man’s mastery over the world.

<sup>23</sup> R.S. Woolhouse, *The Empiricists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16.

<sup>24</sup> J.H. Newman, *Tract XC: On Certain Passages in the XXXIX Articles* (London: Rivingtons, 1865), 47.

Such forthright empiricism took a skeptical view of the possibility of there being any metaphysical properties assigned to The Five Platonic Solids. Although the tetrahedron, octohedron, cube, icosahedron, and the dodecahedron had been known since ancient times, the first thorough examination of them is probably the *Theaetetus*. It is likely that Euclid learned the geometry of Theaetetus, with which he demonstrated familiarity, when he studied in Plato's Academy in Athens. It has been suggested that Euclid's *Elements* were originally written, not as a general treatise on geometry, but as a means to supply the necessary steps for a full appreciation of the five regular solids.<sup>25</sup> Metaphysically minded Greeks associated the regular polyhedra with the four Elements and the Universe. Kepler's *Opera Omnia*, published in Frankfort in 1864, justified this correspondence by stating that the tetrahedron, having the smallest volume for its surface, and the icosahedron, having the largest, exhibit the qualities of dryness and wetness, and, therefore, correspond to Fire and Water. The cube, standing firmly on its own base, corresponds to the stable Earth, while the octahedron, which rotates freely when held by two opposite corners, corresponds to the mobile Air. Finally, the dodecahedron corresponds to the Universe, because the zodiac has twelve signs.<sup>26</sup> Kepler, although a forerunner of the scientific worldview, was nonetheless impelled by Neoplatonic motivations, having a passionate belief in the transcendent power of numbers and geometrical forms and a vision of the Sun as the central image of the Godhead, as well as being devoted to the celestial "harmony of the spheres." Writing to Galileo, Kepler invoked "Plato and Pythagoras, our true preceptors."<sup>27</sup>

For Carroll, the realm of possible knowledge was confined to neither the material nor the intellectual realm. The theosophical movement that swept through Victorian England proclaimed gnosis in the face of the prevailing agnosticism of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Annie Besant, in *The Ideals of Theosophy* (1912), summarized this sentiment as follows:

Hard the sorrow and bitter the pain, wide the gulf and sore the passage: but it can be crossed by the man who realizes the Eternal, and who knows that nothing that earth can do can shake the serenity that is fixed on the rock of the Eternal. When death is conquered and life is his own, he rises in the

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<sup>25</sup> W.W. Rouse Ball, *Mathematical Recreations and Essays* (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1892), 130.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 256.