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Theosophy in Philadelphia: An Ethnographic Study of the Construction of Subjectivity, Organization, and Practice Through Discourse

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THEOSOPHY IN PHILADELPHIA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE
CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY, ORGANIZATION, AND PRACTICE THROUGH
DISCOURSE

By

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Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic analysis of the way in which new students at the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia come to adopt a theosophical worldview. Theosophists are unique in their almost total reliance on discourse as a means to communicate their ideas. This paper uses a discourse-centered approach coupled with the practice theory of anthropology to analyze how subjectivity, social organization, and practice are constructed and maintained at the United Lodge of Theosophists. For this study I spent six months attending weekly meetings at the Lodge. I collected data through participation in meetings, formal and informal interviews, and socializing with students at the Lodge. I was also able to supplement this data by asking students to fill out surveys. As a result, this study shows how subjectivity is altered through unique discursive practices, how social hierarchy is established through the internalization of the discourse, and how this worldview is finally translated into a plan for action in the world.
Introduction

This thesis is an ethnographic analysis of the way in which students at the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia adopt a theosophical worldview. Theosophical ideas provide a model for living in the world, but many of the finer points of the philosophy conflict with the modern Western concept of the universe. To quote Luhrmann in her study of witchcraft in England, “They [Theosophists] know a way of explaining nature—science—which has been remarkably successful in its explanation and remarkably antagonistic towards [many of the theosophical principles] . . .” (Luhrmann 1989, 10). For example, the theosophical texts teach that there are non-material planes of existence and that everything on earth has gone through previous periods of evolution on other planets (see Judge 1987). Because theosophical principles are not encountered in daily life in a Western society outside of movements such as the New Age, it is clear that accepting Theosophy involves a change in a student’s subjectivity. ‘Subjectivity’ is used to refer to individuality and self-awareness, in other words, the condition of being a subject (Henriques et al. 1984, 3). As with any new ideas, Theosophy is taught through discourse: reading and studying theosophical texts and discussing the ideas in group meetings. Thus, a discourse-centered approach that draws on some psychological theory is necessary to understand the way in which new students of the philosophy are socialized into a theosophical worldview. The philosophy stresses the necessity of studying the teachings and subsequently applying them in one’s own life to test for their truth. Finally, we will see how the ideas disseminated in theosophical meetings are translated into action in the world within a practice anthropology model.

According to Greg Urban, “The discourse-centered approach to culture is founded on a single proposition: that culture is localized in concrete, publicly accessible signs, most important
of which are actually occurring instances of discourse” (Urban 1991, 1). In complex societies
evidence for this proposition is particularly visible in smaller communities within the population.
Social groups often employ public signs to affirm their beliefs and differentiate themselves from
other communities: the Amish refrain from using electricity and cars, Muslim women cover their
hair, and orthodox Jewish men wear yamikas. While outward symbols such as these are the most
obvious to outsiders, the discursive practices of social groups serve similar purposes. For
example, the Amish of the Pennsylvania Dutch country still learn German as their first language;
in India, Muslim and Hindu people of the same region can be distinguished by their use of
different lexemes for certain denotational objects, such as water; and Roman Catholics
traditionally held their masses in Latin even after the language was no longer spoken. Discourse
in these instances is a form of social action in which social reality is constructed and maintained.
Meaning in discourse is not absolute, but rather, it is bound in context and negotiated through
interaction (Discursive Practices 1). Thus, to decipher meaning it is necessary to observe
instances of discourse in their naturally occurring context. Through such observation within a
cultural context, the discourse-centered approach in anthropology attempts to recognize and
analyze ways in which group reality is formed and maintained.

As stated earlier, this paper is also indebted to practice anthropology. Practice
anthropology seeks to explain the relationship between human action and “the system.” Sherry
Ortner explains the view held by modern practice theorists:

[They] share a view that ‘the system’ . . . does in fact have very powerful, even ‘determining,’ effect [sic]
upon human action and the shape of events. Their interest in the study of action and interaction is thus not
a matter of denying or minimizing this point, but expresses rather an urgent need to understand where ‘the
system’ comes from—how it is produced and reproduced, and how it may have changed in the past or be
changed in the future. (Ortner 1994, 390)
While Ortner frames this question as the impact of practice on the system, we will be asking questions that go in the opposite direction. That is, having looked at how “the system”, defined in this case as a Theosophical subjectivity, is formed through discourse, we will see the impact of that system on practice. In other words, we will examine how theosophical ideas are translated into action. Although “the system” is seen as an integral whole, the practice approach highlights social asymmetry as the most important dimension of action and structure that serves to form and deform it (Ortner 1994, 391–2). Within the practice theory exist many subtheories about what motivates action. In this paper I will adhere mostly to strain theory. Ortner says that “[i]f actors in interest theory are always actively striving for gains, actors in strain theory are seen as experiencing the complexities of their situations and attempting to solve problems posed by the situations” (Ortner 1994, 395). Furthermore, strain theory

places greater emphasis on the system itself, the forces in play upon actors, as a way of understanding where actors, as we say, are coming from. In particular, a system is analyzed with the aim of revealing the sorts of binds it creates for actors, the sorts of burdens it places on them, and so on. This analysis, in tum, provides much of the context for understanding actors’ motives, and the kinds of projects they construct for dealing with their situations. (Ortner 1994, 395)

This theory will be most helpful in understanding how theosophical ideas are used in daily life, and what problems the philosophy may pose for actors operating within the theosophical worldview.

Finally, I would like to state that as an anthropologist, it is not my goal to declare certain theosophical propositions to be true or false. Luhrmann makes a similar statement in her book, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*. Her point also applies to this work, in which “theosophical” may be substituted for “magical”:

Magical ideas are not incontestably true; neither are they incontestably false, just as libertarianism and Christianity are not necessarily the true, or even the best, perspective on reality. Intelligent, reasonable
people hold different views about these subjects. The anthropologist’s challenge is to identify the factors which allow them to do so, without intruding his or her own opinion. The interesting problem is how different people can find different claims persuasive, not whether those claims are ultimately correct. (Luhrmann 1989, 16)

To this end, this thesis is concerned with how discourse at the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia serves to situate the subject within a theosophical worldview.

Method, Setting, and Rationale

The discourse-centered approach is particularly pertinent in understanding the theosophical movement because activities at the United Lodge revolve around the transmission of Theosophy through discourse. Meetings at the United Lodge of Theosophists (ULT) are held twice a week from October through June, and only one night a week the rest of the year. Wednesday night meetings are categorized as meetings of the “study group” and focus on the study of a small portion of The Ocean of Theosophy by William Q. Judge. Sunday morning meetings form a lecture series, which include formats such as lectures, short talks, and panel discussions. Meetings usually draw between fifteen and thirty people. Most of the students at the ULT range in age from about thirty to eighty, and the demographic is predominantly middle class. If attendance is an indication of practice, the ULT does not discriminate based on race or creed, as there are students at every meeting of every color and background.

In contrast to the reliance on discourse, the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia does not employ many outward symbols for the purposes of cultural transmission and continuity. The meetings themselves are devoid of ritual objects. The Lodge itself maintains an air of quiet dignity and age. It seems more academic than religious; the décor is for the most part somber and sophisticated, yet reflects the eclecticism of the movement. The study library in the Lodge
demonstrates the movement's emphasis on study and discourse. A computer that sits in the corner contrasts the antiquity of the books that line the shelves in the library. A wooden table and chairs are provided for study in the center of the room, and on the wall behind it is a hearth. Atop the mantle lies an Oriental vase, and behind that, a huge, old mirror. In the corner of the room there stands a podium that holds the bust of a woman, the style of which is reminiscent of Greek marble sculpture. All of the books housed in the library relate to theosophical topics, and are available for student use.

Although the auditorium where meetings are held maintains a semblance to a church or synagogue, it is without the regalia that is common to meeting places in many religious traditions. The room is set up with a platform at one end. The central feature of the platform is a table on which sits a microphone perched on top of several books and a glass or two of water for the speakers. Flanking the table is a standing microphone on one side and a chair on the other. Next to the chair is a large, solitary plant in front of a large bay window in the shape of an arch. Facing the platform are rows of chairs arranged in three sections with aisles in between, totaling about 50 seats. In the very back a bench sits against the right back wall. The Eastern influence in the ideology of the group is captured in the Persian rug on the floor, which contrasts the Renaissance-style bas relief in the plaster ceiling and walls.

The contrastive nature of the walls makes them one of the most interesting physical features of the Lodge. The bottom half is constructed out of wood paneling with relief arch carvings painted in a somber brown. Past the midway point, the walls are formed of plaster painted canary yellow. This abrupt shift in style betrays the potential for positive change always inherent in the philosophy. Mounted square within the yellow part of each side wall is a framed picture of one of the founders of the movement. To the left is Helena P. Blavatsky, and to the
right, William Q. Judge. These are the only iconographic features of the auditorium. The rest of the Lodge consists of a vestibule area that houses the book table and an upstairs floor that is the living quarters of one of the students. Within these areas are sprinkled pictures of people important to the movements and a few statues of the Buddha.

My data on the United Lodge of Theosophists was collected through formal and informal interviews, participation in meetings, and socializing with the students at the Lodge. Over a period of about six months I attended meetings at the United Lodge, more or less on a weekly basis. I usually went to Wednesday night meetings, but I also attended some Sunday meetings and a few of the bagel parties that follow the first Sunday meeting of every month. Throughout this time, I studied the theosophical texts on my own as well as in the library alongside other students. Discourse is so central to Theosophy that theosophical texts are sold at the Lodge at cost and complete tape recordings are made at every meeting for students to purchase. I obtained several of these tape recordings to supplement my field notes and also recorded one-on-one interviews with several of the students. Due to the time constraints of this project, I also surveyed the students to gain a wider base from which to assess my propositions.

Although the United Lodge is relatively lacking in outward symbols and the actions at meetings are not heavily ritualized, the discourse at meetings is steeped in symbolic value. Utterances occurring during meetings are markedly different from that of the everyday speech used in casual conversation by students. I propose that it is through the discourse at meetings that students come to adopt the identity of a Theosophist and internalize a theosophical worldview. The purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which discursive practices at the United Lodge serve to situate students within this worldview and then to examine how the worldview is effectively translated into a way of life.
Becoming a Theosophist means accepting a new worldview. But how does discourse transform subjectivity in this setting? Greg Urban states, “If spoken or printed discourse is a vehicle for thought, it is also a tool for persuasion and manipulation, for commanding and coordinating actions, for kindling and expressing emotions, and for maintaining social relations” (Urban 1991, 4). In terms of my own experience at the United Lodge, I will explore how discourse serves many of the purposes outlined by Urban. I will discuss how practices such as framing the discourse, the use of in-group terminology, stylized interaction during meetings, and the unique pronunciation of Standard English words function as mechanisms that effectively change the subjectivity of new students.

I will show how even social organization parallels the structure of discourse, and argue that discourse actually creates a hierarchy within the Lodge that hinges on the variable levels of internalization of the theosophical discourse, which is dependent on the ability to teach this information and command the rhetorical styles specific to the ULT. Through this analysis we will see that discourse constructs and maintains social organization at the United Lodge in a fundamental way.

This paper will also probe the aspects of theosophical philosophy that are problematic in the establishment and maintenance of social groups and demonstrate how discourse mediates these issues. Some of the considerations will include the problematic definition of a “Theosophist”, the lack of systematization of texts, and the difficulty of maintaining a group without a leader. I will also highlight the rhetorical styles used by students doing “platform work” in an attempt to show how discursive strategies are used to solve the problems of sensibility and intelligibility of the texts. Finally, this paper will outline how ideology is translated into practice through a change in subjectivity.
History and Objectives of the Movement

The United Lodge of Theosophists is a group that developed out of the larger Theosophical Movement. The first Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by a small group of people in New York City. The original founders are recognized by outsiders to be Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, an eccentric and mysterious Russian woman who preferred to be called HPB, and Henry Steel Olcott, a pragmatic American lawyer (Campbell 1980, 1–2). The Theosophical Society drew on the contemporary philosophical, metaphysical, and intellectualist ideas of the time. These trends included the drive to integrate religion with science, an occultist interpretation of free will and progress, an increasing level of awareness about Asian religions, an assertion of democratic individualism, an opposition to traditional orthodox Christianity, and an association with liberalism and non-traditional religion such as spiritualism and Western Mysteries Schools (Campbell 1980, 16–20). The Theosophical Society asserted its authority by claiming “to be a revival of an ancient wisdom-religion based on contact with hidden Adepts or Masters” (Campbell 1980, 1).

The purpose of the Society was to pursue occult research, and the original members were mostly middle-class professionals who were interested in nontraditional forms of religion and spirituality. The original Theosophical Society had officers and by-laws, and did not include belief in universal brotherhood and an emphasis on Asian religious beliefs that later came to characterize the movement (Campbell 1980, 26–7). The United Lodge of Theosophists was formed by Robert Crosbie, and is one of three major off-shoots of the original Theosophical Society. According to Campbell, the United Lodge of Theosophists (ULT) was largely formed in reaction to the power struggle over authority in the movement after HPB died:
[The ULT] ... was formed in Los Angeles in 1909 as a reaction against the division of Theosophy and the conflicts between the other two groups...Feeling that the cause of Theosophy had been harmed by the clash of personalities and organizations, he then formed a group that sought unity through focusing on the works of Blavatsky and Judge and through minimizing formal organization. (Campbell 1980, 143)

From its inception, the ULT was devoted to the study and dissemination of "straight-line" theosophical teachings as defined by the writings of HPB and William Q. Judge, another important theosophical leader.

Some years after the founding of the original Theosophical Society, Robert Croosbie sought to remove the personality cults associated with other theosophical groups by making the ULT an impersonal group. This is apparent in the Declaration of the ULT that is still used by all United Lodges:

The policy of this Lodge is independent devotion to the cause of Theosophy, without professing attachment to any Theosophical organization. It is loyal to the great Founders of the Theosophical Movement, but does not concern itself with dissensions or differences of individual opinion.

The work it has on hand and the aim it keeps in view are too absorbing and too lofty to leave it the time or inclination to take part in side issues. That work and that end is the dissemination of the Fundamental Principles of the Philosophy of Theosophy, and the exemplification in practice of those principles, through a truer realization of the SELF; a profounder conviction of Universal Brotherhood.

It holds that the unassailable basis for union among Theosophists, wherever and however situated, is "similarity of aim, purpose and teaching," and therefore has neither Constitution, By-Laws nor Officers, the sole bond between its Associates being that basis. And it aims to disseminate this idea among Theosophists in the furtherance of Unity.

It regards as Theosophists all who are engaged in the true service of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, condition or organization, and

It welcomes to its association all those who are in accord with its declared purposes and who desire to fit themselves, by study and otherwise, to be the better able to help and teach others.
"The true Theosophist belongs to no cult or sect, yet belongs to each and all." (Pamphlet from Philadelphia ULT, Jan-March 2001, original emphasis)

Today there are 22 United Lodges worldwide, eight of which are in America. At the beginning of every meeting at the ULT in Philadelphia, a student reads either this Declaration or the Three Fundamentals Principles of Theosophy.

In a pamphlet entitled "Theosophy Simply Stated", the three Principles are enumerated as, "(1) The Self, as reality in man; (2) Law, as the process of evolution of form and soul; and (3) Evolution, as the design of life in terms of meaning and purpose" (Theosophy Simply Stated, original emphasis). In meetings the Fundamental Principles are usually referred to simply as "Deity", "Law" or "Cycles", and "Evolution". The First Principle essentially maintains that all life has an underlying unity, as it all contains a spark of the divine. This is the basis of universal brotherhood. The Second Principle, Law, refers to the idea of Karma. The universe is based on a just system of cause and effect in conjunction with free will. Included in this principle is the concept of reincarnation. Finally, the Third Principle holds that everything in the universe is constantly evolving, and it is humanity’s goal to reach ever higher levels of spiritual evolution. These principles are the backbone of theosophical thought as expounded by the United Lodge of Theosophists.

The Discourse of Theosophical Meetings

The meetings at the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia revolve around study. Meetings are indirectly social gatherings, but first and foremost they are an opportunity for students to come together to discuss theosophical ideas. Prior to Wednesday night meetings, the study library at the Lodge is open for two hours, where students can read the passage that will be discussed during that night’s meeting or utilize the library for its large collection of books.
pertaining to Theosophy. I was accustomed to studying “the part” in the library before each meeting, and for most students time spent in the library was an occasion for serious study with little social conversation.

Sunday meetings are slightly more formal. They may take the form of a lecture, panel discussion, or short talk from a student. These meetings center on a specific topic relating to theosophical thought, as opposed to a discussion on a passage of a particular text. Every first Sunday of the month there is a gathering after the meeting in the upstairs of the Lodge. During these gatherings, students convene in a social setting while eating a vast array of bagels and sipping Laura’s delicious Earl Grey tea. The first Sunday bagel parties were the only time students met in a strictly social setting, and even these followed a meeting.

Several students expressed the opinion that first Sunday bagel parties were a rare chance for students to interact on a purely social level, providing an opportunity to talk with other students outside the context of Theosophy. Molly, a middle-aged psychologist, thought it was interesting that students share their most profound beliefs and ideas in meetings, but fail to learn a lot about each other on a personal level. She conceded that this is the nature of Theosophy, as the philosophy teaches that things associated with personality are fleeting and illusory. Meetings serve the express purpose of relating theosophical ideas and helping students to understand these ideas. To this end, they center on discourse. Individual study is encouraged, but the student always has an opportunity to listen to and eventually participate in the discourse about theosophical ideas.

The concept of “Theosophy” itself is framed through discourse at ULT meetings. In the case of narrative, Greg Urban maintains that “[metadiscursive] framing will relate to how you are to understand the connection between the narrative and the rest of reality” (Urban 1996, 7).
One example of metadiscursive framing would be labeling a certain type of narrative a “dream.” In this way, people within the community of listeners are forewarned about the relationship that this narrative will have to the real world. In the case of Theosophy, the movement itself is framed through discourse as a first step in changing the subjectivity of new students. Namely, new students are told that Theosophy is both a ‘religion’ and a ‘science’, frames of reference already familiar to the students, so that they know how they are to understand the movement in terms of how it should be applied outside of the Lodge.

As a science, the philosophy is universally applicable because it is understood to be the truth that has emerged from eons of “testing, checking, and verifying” (a Theosophical adage). In this way Theosophy is not “divine revelation”, and students are encouraged to “take the knowledge presented and learn it to be able to apply it and test it,” as Jenny, an older student, said one meeting. Nothing should be accepted on blind faith. However, because students are also told that Theosophy is a religion, it is not troubling that Theosophy makes metaphysical claims that cannot be tested in one’s life. Science cannot deal with the unseen, but Theosophy claims that “there is more to life than matter.” Although outsiders may see this dual of nature of Theosophy to be contradictory, the practice of metadiscursively framing the discourse by calling Theosophy the ‘wisdom religion’ or the ‘scientific religion,’ allows new students to more readily accept its assumptions.

In-group terms are frequently used by the students at the United Lodge to situate people as well as the discursive practices that are used to transmit the philosophy of Theosophy. Various segments of meetings and the people who perform them are differentiated through terms specific to the Lodge. ‘The Chair’ begins the meeting with a few words about the Lodge. Then a ‘student’ who may be referred to as ‘the Declare’ comes up to the platform to recite either the
Declaration of Theosophy or the Three Principles, which is followed by a summary of "the Part", or the selection of the text for that day, by another student. After the summary the floor opens for questions, which the student who summarized the part attempts to answer. After a period of time this student leaves the platform and the Chair takes any remaining questions or clarifies any of the previous discussion. Sunday meetings are essentially formatted in the same way, but the lecture or panel discussion is substituted for the summary of the part.

The terms 'student', 'platform work', 'the Chair', and 'the part' are labels that discursively frame the different aspects of learning and conveying theosophical knowledge that are recognized by students at the ULT. The way in which different aspects are framed implicitly conveys certain tenets of the philosophy and the social organization at the Lodge. In a devotional meeting to commemorate William Q. Judge, Sam posed the question, "How do we as students learn and apply the teachings and express them to others?" He expressed the answer in terms of William Q. Judge's thoughts on the subject:

First we need to understand what it means by the term 'universal brotherhood'. The foundation is understanding this idea and how to apply it. We need the recognition that the 'Self' is identical in each and all of us, one with the divine source of life, deity. We are all one in essence, potential, possibility.

This message is transmitted through the discursive labels employed at the Lodge. A 'student' is anyone studying the philosophy of Theosophy, but this term specifically refers to people who attend meetings at the Lodge. A gloss in Standard English could be 'member' or 'Theosophist', but the use of the term at the Lodge emphasizes a process, the becoming of a Theosophist through the study of the texts and acquiring of knowledge. In fact, at one meeting Laura claimed, "HPB didn't even call herself a Theosophist. Those are the Buddhas. She said that she was trying to understand the knowledge and the only failure is to stop trying." By calling all of the people who attend meetings 'students', it conveys the idea that everyone has the same
unlimited potential. In terms of the philosophy, we are all “universal rays of mind”, and our abilities must be developed through hard work. This term serves to emphasize the idea that all Theosophists are learning the knowledge, and only when we have become perfect human beings during the course of many births and rebirths over courses of evolution on different planets will we become “Masters.”

The United Lodge formalizes this idea in its Declaration, with the assertion that it has no officers, and does not concern itself with individual differences of opinion. The term ‘student’ conveys the message that there are no formal, authoritative upholders of the religion, and thus imparts the idea that the philosophy is based on individual experience and some higher, universal truth, rather than dogma. As Sam said, “the Society and movement exists for the benefit of humanity, not for the glorification of one person. All we need to do is look at the works of HPB and have a pure motive to carry on. We don’t need a leader. The most important thing is solidarity.” However, we shall see that in practice there is an underlying hierarchy, as the transmission of theosophical knowledge through discourse relies on the more experienced students teaching the less experienced ones. This hierarchy is also framed through discursive labels.

The term ‘platform work’ refers to the discursive presentations given by students at the meetings. When engaging in platform work, the student stands or sits on the platform at the front of the auditorium and speaks into a microphone. While all public speaking engagements contain some performative aspect, students at the United Lodge downplay performance as a part of platform work because the philosophy of Theosophy dictates that personal attributes are illusory and fleeting, and thus not meaningful. The important aspect of platform work is the transmission of the philosophy, and this is done through discourse. My observations at meetings
support this conviction. Props or visual aids are never used; only the words of the speaker and the metadiscursive discussion after the presentation are important. Although some speakers are more or less fluid than others, the emphasis is on the ability to communicate the material in an understandable manner than on the ability to capture the audience’s attention. I asked Todd, a student of Theosophy at the Lodge for six years, if doing platform work has made him a better speaker. He responded, “No, no. They don’t…teach you how to do it. They don’t tell you how to do it. There’s no lessons.” If platform work only incidentally serves to develop public speaking skills, it does necessarily embed the speaker within a theosophical context, thus serving to internalize the doctrines. Because the style of the individual speaker is not emphasized, it is the actual discourse that constructs reality for students at the Lodge. In fact, speakers doing platform work make use of several rhetorical devices in order to communicate the material effectively. These include the extensive use of analogy and asking questions that they already know the answer to, and these techniques will discussed later in terms of their use as adaptations to the problem of unintelligibility of Theosophical discourse.

Types of platform work involve reading the Declaration, reading the Principles, ‘doing the part’, and ‘doing the chair’. In the section on History and Objectives, I discussed the Declaration and the Principles, so their reading at meetings is self-explanatory. ‘Doing the part’ and ‘doing the chair’ denote specific duties that are fulfilled at meetings by students with certain responsibilities to maintaining that role and the appropriate discursive practices associated with it. ‘Doing the part’ means summarizing the passage of text that is the focal point of discussion for that particular meeting. It involves summarizing the passage (‘the part’) and then remaining on the platform to answer questions afterwards. ‘Doing the chair’ refers to the work done by the person who is roughly equivalent to a facilitator of the meeting. This person presides over the
meetings, and is the only person who remains on the platform for the whole course of the meeting. The Chair gives an introduction to the meeting and speaks briefly in between different portions of the meeting. However, her most important function is to answer questions and clarify any remaining issues at the end of the meeting.

These labels delineate the way that discourse is structured in meetings and provide a metadiscursive commentary on the way that identity is constructed within the group. It is obvious that these labels differentiate between different types of discursive practice. I propose that the function of this differentiation to separate different levels of internalization of Theosophy. This, in turn, maintains a hierarchy of commitment to Theosophy by metadiscursively generating increasingly restricted access to higher levels of discourse practice based on seniority and affinity for the philosophy. With the absence of an authoritative leader, this is how social organization is constructed and maintained at the Lodge.

As is the case with exposure to any new form of knowledge, Theosophists undoubtedly go through a process whereby the assertions and details of the philosophy become increasingly fixed and internalized. This process occurs through discourse, in the reading and study of theosophical texts and the constant exposure to the ideas in meetings. Initially, the process of fixation is imparted to the student through repetition. At every meeting a student reads the Declaration or the Principles, and this serves to drive the most important theosophical statements into the student’s consciousness. At the highest level, however, internalization is reinforced and tested by a student’s endeavor to teach the doctrines to other students. As Cathy wrote in a survey response, “Try to explain the philosophy to someone, and you will discover all the areas that you still need to study.” The ability to teach the materials to others is the normative goal at the ULT. At one meeting Sam said, “the goal is to acquire self-knowledge and the ability to
express it. That’s what it means to be a Mahatma [Master], and then we need to help others acquire the same level of self-understanding.” We have already seen that this is accomplished through platform work.

The Social Organization at the Lodge

Although the Lodge emphasizes unity and the lack of an authoritative leader, even egalitarian societies have some type of organization, whether it be the division of labor or the fact that a particularly skilled hunter may decide when and where the group moves. Urban states that “social organization is the objective field in which, through which, and by which discourse circulates. It is the medium . . . for the physical movement of discourse across space and time by means of replication” (Urban 1996, 25). Because meetings center on the dissemination of theosophical ideas through discourse, it is only logical that students who know more about the ideas teach those who know less. Urban argues that discourse is a means of illuminating social organization and vice versa (Urban 1996, 25–6). I will argue that the underlying social hierarchy at the Lodge is based on the level of internalization of the theosophical doctrines. ‘Internalization’ in this case is defined as the ability to reproduce theosophical textual artifacts faithfully and with ease. It also includes the ability to command a certain rhetorical style specific to discourse at the ULT. This ability, and hence, the social structure at the ULT, most often corresponds to seniority and also the affinity for understanding the ideas, and it is evidenced through metadiscursive labels.

Theoretically, anyone may do platform work. At some point in almost every meeting the Chair mentions that the opportunity to do platform work is open to all and solicited on a volunteer basis. But not all students do platform work. It seems obvious that there must be some
mechanism by which access to the platform is regulated in order to ensure that the philosophy is not transmitted incorrectly by a student who has not yet properly internalized the theosophical ideas. This mechanism must in part rely on the fact that many people do not enjoy public speaking, and any reasonable person would not want to get up in front of a group of people to impart knowledge about something that he or she did not know. Through interviews and my own experience, however, I realized that most people start doing platform work when they are invited to do so by a senior student. Three students that currently do platform work explicitly stated that they felt ready to do platform work because an older student asked them to. This is evidenced in Todd’s case:

I didn’t feel that I was ready... it was casually, casually offered, not offered, but suggested. And when it was [suggested], by the person who suggested it, who I really, really respect here, it never dawned on me that I would be able [to do it]....

This suggests that there is a hierarchy in place in the Lodge, and different levels of participation in platform work have varying restrictions on their access. These levels are mediated through the discourse, in the sense that they are differentiated through metadiscursive labels and in practice a senior student must invite a younger student to begin platform work.

From my observations there seem to be four or five loosely defined levels of platform work, and each level represents a greater level of internalization of the Theosophical worldview. I already stated that internalization can roughly be defined as the process of acquiring knowledge of the texts and principles, as well as the adoption of the discursive practices used to communicate the beliefs to others. These are developed from my own impressions and survey and interview data I collected on the chronological order in which students began to do certain types of platform work. The hierarchy of platform work is as follows: 1.) Reading the Declaration, 2.) Doing the Principles, 3.) Doing the Part, and 4.) Doing the Chair. Reading the
Declaration, which is coupled with reading the announcements, is the type of platform work that requires the lowest level of theosophical knowledge. It basically consists of reading verbatim from a piece of paper. The second level is doing the Principles. This job is slightly harder because it involves distilling a short speech from the myriad things that one could say about the Fundamental Principles, and thus some individual interpretation with respect to what is important to mention. Although Todd said he was happy to start doing platform work by reading the Declaration, the Three Fundamentals were a different story:

I think it's different for me because there's so much, there's so much that can be said. There's a billion books that can be written about it that you . . . I mean, personally, . . . my main concern is when I get up there, am I wasting everybody else's time? And that's a paranoia that I have, so I want to get up there and make sure that everybody who's in their seats feels like it was worth their time listening to me.

This sentiment is relevant because it shows that internalization of the ideas is a factor in social organization, and specifically, the judgment of efficacy of a particular speaker.

Next in my categorization of the hierarchy of platform work is the summarization of the part, which is somewhat on a par with giving a short talk in Sunday meetings. As this duty requires summarizing and speaking from either notes or off hand, it requires a greater level of internalization of the doctrine and commitment to the knowledge. Because this talk is then followed by the expectation that the speaker will answer questions relating to the part, the speaker is also tested on his knowledge of the doctrine beyond the scope of the passage at hand. I would assume that speakers are probably wary of assuming this responsibility until they have internalized the doctrine to a greater degree. Todd verified this hypothesis by saying, "But I thought, . . . well, certainly I could do it. I mean I could academically, intellectually I could do it. And the first few times that I got up there I got up there just as a service to do it, but no way would I take questions." Finally, the Chair represents the fourth and highest level\(^1\), and during
the time that I attended meetings I only witnessed four different individuals acting in this role. Only the most senior and involved students acted in this capacity. The Chair must be an expert of Theosophy, as he is expected to be able to answer any question that arises.

Ascension through the hierarchy at the ULT corresponds with the level of internalization of the philosophy of Theosophy, which, in part, is surely a function of seniority. This makes sense, as those who have been around the longest have heard the discourse reproduced on more occasions, and have had the opportunity to wrestle with the ideas longer. Of the four people who acted as the Chair at meetings that I attended, the youngest student had been attending meetings for 15 years. Many of the characterizations used by older members were actually straight from the texts, demonstrating a very high level of internalization. Conversely, younger members conveyed the theosophical ideas in ways that adhere less strictly to the texts and tended to ramble and stammer slightly more in their presentations. This is evidence that they are less confident with the material. Occasionally, a younger student would drift away from the texts enough to express blatant opinions that were probably not a part of the actual philosophy. In one instance, a student commented that some religions have anthropomorphized the deity and consequently “made a mess of it.” Although this sentiment underlies much of the theosophical thought, this condemnation is not contiguous with the theosophical register. Such beliefs are usually not expressed outright, but discreetly suggested in the context that theosophical ideas are presented as a better alternative.

Although the Lodge “does not concern itself with differences of individual opinion,” it is clear that the ideal here is strict adherence to the texts. When opinions are expressed, they are to be framed as such. In one instance, a student metadiscursively framed his deviation from the texts by saying, “That was a note to myself. I’m not sure if that came from the text.” Ability to
quote from the texts and navigate them with ease is one measure of internalization of the theosophical principles.

The veracity of the hypothesis that the level of internalization of the doctrine determines position in the hierarchy has been demonstrated by the differing degree of students’ abilities to field questions from the group. At meetings, the Chair is invariably better equipped than the person doing the part to expound on theosophical ideas. This is why at some point in the meeting the part steps down from the platform and the Chair takes the opportunity to clear up and remaining questions and concerns. Level of internalization is also dependent on a person’s affinity for these ideas, and within the Theosophical worldview, those that have an affinity for the teachings are said to have had contact with them in past lives. Although it is difficult to establish cause and effect, I would even go one step further to say that access to the highest levels of the theosophical social organization is mediated through discourse in the sense that it is partially determined by the student’s ability to command certain rhetorical devices from the platform. This argument will be developed further on in the paper.

It is important to note that while I am presenting this model as a hierarchical structure of social organization, it is not the final word on authority at the ULT. Although it is functionally accurate as the basis by which theosophical knowledge is imparted to new students, I suspect that a Theosophist would say that it is not a hierarchy in the sense that the people at the top enjoy any special privileges or are any better Theosophists. Indeed, in theory anyone at the ULT can ascend this hierarchy, irrespective of seniority and without special training. The only prerequisite is a commitment to the philosophy. In addition, these positions along the hierarchy are only authoritative to the point that members in these relative positions are perhaps afforded greater respect among the group for their knowledge and commitment. It is understandable that
in a group with an egalitarian ethos, the determining factor of authority would rest upon the ability to maintain a certain level of continuity in the tradition, a necessity in any cultural group.

It is apparent from observation and the metadiscursive labels applied to discourse roles that there are four levels of social organization at the Lodge, each with more restricted access. In actuality, the lowest level group at the Lodge is comprised of the students and visitors to the Lodge who have never participated in reproducing the discourse at meetings through platform work. However, social roles are forged through the process of negotiation, and even students who have never done platform work are encouraged to ask questions of those on the platform, and many do so. Luhrmann explains the process through which newcomers increase their knowledge:

The interested newcomer, tentatively prepared to accept the explicit ideas, learns to argue with the experienced, and in learning, slowly finds, by trial and error, the structure which gives it content. This structure of course comprises many elements—the assumptions and associations within the conversation as well as the fact that the terms of the conversation refer to knowledge unknown to the uninitiated. (Luhrmann 1989, 146)

Cathy, a student of seven years, also alluded to this process. In response to a survey question about the relationship between participation in meetings and commitment to the group, she wrote, “Participation gives one a fuller perspective and helps one formulate relevant questions,” (original emphasis). The greater the participation in this respect, the more “theosophical” a person will learn to be.

**Becoming a Member of the Lodge**

The ULT provides the opportunity for interested students to become official members by signing a written statement to the effect that they sympathize with the theosophical cause and the
goals of the Lodge. However, I propose that membership in the group is functionally consummated with the advent of participation in platform work as opposed to filling out a membership card. Participation in platform work is symbolic of the fact that the doctrine has become internalized to a point that the student may begin to teach others, in this case, by speaking at meetings. This represents an active step in learning and transmitting the philosophy, and as most students are asked by a senior student to begin this work, it is symbolic of the group accepting the student into the fold. Participation in meetings is a public declaration of one’s commitment, as opposed to the passive and individual task of signing a piece of paper.

My position is supported by my own experience. Although I have never filled out a membership card, after about five months of attending meetings I was asked to read the Declaration by a student of 15 years experience. I did so, and after the meeting I was congratulated by everyone. Melinda asked me if I was still taking notes. When I answered that I was, she asked if I have begun to come to meetings because I enjoy them as well. I responded affirmatively and she added, “Because when I saw you up there I though it might be for yourself, too.” This comment leads me to believe that the act of participating in the transmission of the theosophical ideas through the instituted forms of discourse is a public affirmation of one’s commitment to the doctrine. Judging by the amount of attention I received after first participating in this capacity, I would say that one’s transition into platform work is a rite of passage marking a change in subjectivity. Actively teaching the materials cements one’s commitment to the group in a more fundamental way than signing the sheet of paper. When asked in a survey if her attitude had changed toward Theosophy or the ULT after beginning to do platform work, one student wrote, “Yes, [my] attitude is less fanatical, [the] commitment more real. I had no real commitment to either Theosophy or the ULT before my understanding developed.” Because it is not mandatory
that members commit time or money to the Lodge, the definition of who is a Theosophilist can be fluid. But I think that it is fair to say that the final test is the active participation in the dissemination of the beliefs through the discourse at meetings.

Furthermore, students who participate in the discourse at meetings not only begin to internalize the theosophical ideas, but also adopt new ways of talking about them. Ritualized discursive practices situate the student in a theosophical mode of thought. These include linguistic features such as the prohibition on calling individuals by their personal names during meetings and the tendency to replace first person singular pronouns with first person plural pronouns. The former practice is quite marked. Only the person summarizing the part and the Chair have the opportunity to call on students to answer their questions during meetings, and we have already established that both of these groups mark off those students most committed to a theosophical worldview. In all of the meetings that I attended over the course of six months, I never heard a person taking questions call on a student by referring to him or her by name. The Part or the Chair will invariably say something to the effect of, “Over there” or “in the corner” in conjunction with pointing to specify a particular student who has her hand raised. In many instances, in fact, the reference was unnecessarily clumsy when someone on the platform called upon a student in the audience. The reference was always non-personal, even when I knew the two students to be on a first name basis. In fact, this tendency also extends into the dialogue between the Chair and the other person on the platform. In most cases, the speaker is identified by his metadiscursive label. Common utterances of this nature included, “We’ll have to leave that to the Chair” and “We’ll let the Chair clear that up.” Bruce F. Campbell points out that “the group never identifies its speakers at public meetings, and most of the articles in Theosophy are
unsigned” (Campbell 1980: 144). These prohibitions illustrate ways of using discourse to construct subjectivity.

The doctrine of impersonality is reified through the unnatural prohibition of using personal names. Students at the Lodge recognize this practice on a conscious level as a means through which subjectivity is constructed. This is illustrated by Todd’s response to my question about why students do not use each other’s names during meetings:

Well, well simply because that, that the idea in the Lodge is let’s come together for one reason. And the one reason is, you know, from a standpoint is universal brotherhood, and if that’s what it is, then we’re all a part of that. And, but really the only way to be a part of that is to leave yourself out so when we try in, during meetings to leave out the words, the words ‘me’, or ‘I’, or ‘you’, we even try to, you know, . . . if you had said something and I wanted to follow up I usually wouldn’t say, ‘um, you know, five minutes ago Kathryn said such and such.’ I would just pick up where you left off. That way we can leave the personal out of it and just stick to the ideas.

Todd, a student of six years, went on to say that he picked up on this practice after attending a few meetings, and later asked a senior student about the practice. It is obvious from Todd’s answer that names are not used during meetings because this discursive practice is a way of changing the subjectivity of a student. Furthermore, the change must occur at least partially on a conscious level, since Todd asked about the practice when he was a new student and has since adopted it. The prohibition extends past discourse and in to the realm of action, as well. On two different occasions, I was sitting in my seat at a meeting before it began when a student (a different student on each occasion) ascended the platform to begin the meeting. On both of these occasions I had not had the opportunity to say ‘hi’ to that student before the meeting started, so I instinctively waved upon making eye contact. On each of these occasions, the student smiled back at me but did not return my wave. This is another way of disassociating meetings with individual personality.
I suggest that Theosophists are also socialized into the concept of universal brotherhood through repeated exposure to a discourse that omits the use of 'I', 'my', and sometimes even 'you'. These phrases are usually replaced by the first person plural pronouns, 'we', 'us', and 'our'. In some instances, the use of 'we' was ambiguous, so I could not be sure if the speaker was actually referring to some 'we' out of context. However, a few instances of this were particularly unambiguous and salient. In one instance, Laura was relating a personal anecdote to illustrate a point. Throughout her narrative, she consistently used 'we' instead of 'I':

We were doing bad in math. We were failing geometry. We could intuit the answer but couldn't say how we got there. We thought it was dumb because we would know the right answer before everyone else but because we couldn't do it their way it was wrong. One day the teacher asked us to stay after school...

Although it is incontestable that Laura was referring to only herself in this narrative, she refrains from using any first person singular pronouns. Another illustration of this practice is when Denise was doing the part and fielded a question from the group. In beginning to answer Denise said, "We completely lost your question. Give us a minute." In these cases it is clear that the 'we' refers to an 'I' in normal usage. The use of 'I' is avoided because in principle it is contrary to the concept that we are all a ray of universal mind, and thus part of a greater unity. By shedding the conventional vestiges of personality and individuality used in normal discourse, exposure and participation in the discourse at meetings at the United Lodge is a first step in implementing the philosophy.

Whether it is on a conscious or sub-conscious level, students will recognize the strangeness of these discursive features and adopt them to fit in with the group. Another peculiar discursive feature of theosophical meetings is the pronunciation of the term 'Ego' as 'Eggo'. On one occasion, Todd was doing the part and began to pronounce 'Ego' in the Standard English
manner. He quickly corrected this break in the theosophical register by adopting the ‘ego’ pronunciation. In understanding this speech event, it is useful to quote Urban. He says

the similarities over time that form the basis for such metadiscursive acts are contingent and open-ended, susceptible to reconfiguration (a new pronunciation that is sufficiently similar to earlier ones to allow a recognition to take place, but different enough to cause a reconfiguration). (Urban 1991, 12)

This shows that small changes in discursive practice and metadiscursive understanding of the discourse allow for a change in subjectivity. In this case, the slight change in pronunciation of a Standard English word allows a new student to be able to recognize the reference, but also serves as another way in which a new subjectivity is forged. The fact that Todd felt pressure to conform to the theosophical register during his rendition of the part leads me to believe that the extent to which a speaker commands these particular discursive practices is symbolic of his level of internalization of the philosophy. Subsequently, the level of adoption of these practices at least partially determines status at the Lodge.

There are several aspects of Theosophy that are particular to the philosophy and make it difficult to sustain the movement. Most striking among these is the problematic definition of a Theosophist. We have already briefly mentioned some of the vagaries of membership at the United Lodge, namely that support in the form of time and money is not required of members, membership is not defined by the following of a certain leader or based on an authoritative text, and even that what one believes is not necessarily grounds for being or not being a Theosophist. William Q. Judge makes this claim in the Preface to The Ocean of Theosophy, by saying, “the Theosophical Society is not involved in nor bound by anything said in the book, nor are any of its members any the less good Theosophists because they may not accept what has been set down” (Judge, Preface).
The Declaration of the ULT provides a mission statement for the Lodge and a definition of who is a ‘Theosophist’:

The policy of this Lodge is independent devotion to the cause of Theosophy, without professing attachment to any Theosophical organization. It is loyal to the great Founders of the Theosophical Movement, but does not concern itself with dissensions or differences of individual opinion.

... the unassailable basis for union among Theosophists, wherever and however situated, is ‘similarity of aim, purpose and teaching,’...

... It regards as Theosophists all who are engaged in the true service of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, condition or organization. ... (Philadelphia U.L.T. Pamphlet)

However, this definition is obviously problematic with respect to group maintenance because it defines a ‘Theosophist’ in such loose terms that anyone could be a Theosophist. Furthermore, it denies that a Theosophist need have any commitment to a particular organization. It is easy to see how the ethos of Theosophy is in conflict with the necessary conditions for maintaining a social group with continuity and longevity. However, I have already presented an argument for the way in which this difficulty is mediated through discourse. The effective definition of membership is at the Lodge is based on the commitment to teach the principles of Theosophy. In addition, the fact that everyone is considered a ‘student’, no matter how long he or she has been coming to meetings is a way in which the issue of membership and authority within the group is skirted. Because there is no end to the acquisition of wisdom in sight, this discursive gloss allows students at the Lodge to consider themselves a part of the group without worrying about differences of opinion or level of experience.

Becoming a member of a group means mastering the forms of knowledge that are collectively shared by group members. Luhrmann (1989, 144–5) calls these common terms of reference “common knowledge” (in terms of the group). In terms of Theosophy, mastering the common knowledge means being able to understand and reproduce the theosophical discourse.
In addition to the aspects already covered, this involves being able to adopt a register that is peppered with words (some of them foreign) that convey concepts borrowed from Eastern religions and particular to “New Age” groups. Common knowledge is largely formed through study of the texts, as these are the authoritative sources of Theosophy. As such they are referred to and quoted in meetings.

However, meetings are necessary to ensure that the texts are interpreted in the same way. As Urban says, “Recent discourse studies seem to be suggesting . . . that shared meaning is a product of public accessibility rather than (or in addition to) a necessary precondition for it” (Urban 1991, 10). Public accessibility means attending meetings. Although the texts are necessary to maintain continuity in the reproduction of the theosophical discourse, meetings are necessary to ensure that the meaning generated from the texts is shared. Several students indicated on the surveys that I passed out that the most helpful aspect of meetings was to “clarify” their ideas about Theosophy. When asked in a survey if she thought discussing the texts is necessary in the process of understanding them, Jenny wrote, “one studying alone has a tendency to go off on their old ideas without having a basis to start on.” Starting from the opposite point, Urban agrees with Jenny by maintaining that people who are exposed to the a particular discourse will tend to reproduce it in the same way:

If two speakers have the same kinds of experiences with what is objectively describable as the same discourse, then they will tend to produce, in their reflections on decontextualized meanings, the same kinds of metadiscursive statements. The proposition makes the meanings a function of accessibility, rather than the other way around. (Urban 1991, 10)

By providing a forum in which the ideas in the texts are publicly accessible, the discourse of meetings at the ULT make the immutable knowledge presented in the texts contemporary and relevant to daily life. However, we are continually reminded that study of the texts is a
necessary part of becoming a Theosophist. While the discourse at meetings is always subject to the interpretation of the students doing platform work, the texts are constant. Urban illustrates this point by saying, “If convergence is limited by the objective entropy of discourse, divergence is limited by whatever objective sameness is the precondition for publicness, regardless of how disparate the interpretations” (Urban 1991, 20). At the ULT, “precondition for publicness” is knowledge of the texts.

**Circulation of the Theosophical Discourse**

In his book *Metaphysical Community*, Greg Urban says that public circulation is the basis of all culture, and the circulation of discourse “grounds the possibility of locally shared frameworks of interpretation” (Urban 1996, xiii). We have seen several ways in which students are situated within the theosophical worldview through publicly circulating discourse. However, Urban asserts that circulation of discourse is only possible

> if discourse is simultaneously two things, not just one. Discourse is about the world (it is the bearer of truth, statements, meanings), but discourse is also in the world. It has a thing-like quality, and it is that quality that makes circulation, (and hence culture) possible. Discourse is an object of the senses as well as of the intellect. (Urban 1996, xiii)

Thus, the problem of circulation must be related to sensibility and intelligibility.

It is clear that adherence to the texts is important to maintain continuity in the circulation of discourse. The texts maintain the continuity of the tradition by grounding the discourse. Greg Urban explains the necessity of continuity of form in group discourse:

> As discourse meanings expand their social circulation, especially through transmission across the generations, the form of their expression becomes fixed. In other words, meanings are made sensible here not by enactmen, but by holding constant the physical form of their expression. (Urban 1996, 25)
Anything may be said during meetings, but the texts provide a starting point to keep the meetings focused and are a constant source of reference. During one meeting, a man become frustrated and with some hostility asked the Part why she was reading from the book if we all had our own copies to read. Undaunted, the Part responded that she was summarizing and reading, “so you know I’m not making it up.” In another meeting, Sam asked, “do various rounds of evolution represent cycles of descent from matter to spirit and vice versa?” In reply, Michelle quoted the Ocean of Theosophy, saying, “we don’t like to make up answers.” Because it is possible for anything to circulate in the discourse of meetings, adherence to the texts serves to ground the discourse. In meetings at the United Lodge, the focus on one portion of the texts provides a starting point for the discourse, and periodic quoting from the texts makes sure the discourse does not stray too far. In addition, only straight-line theosophical texts are recommended. This basically includes the works of Blavatsky, Judge, and Crosbie. Although there is no theosophical equivalent of the Bible, tradition is to some extent maintained by prescribing appropriate reading. However, the circulation of public discourse also relies on sensibility and intelligibility, and the theosophical texts pose problems in both of these areas.

First we will consider the aspect of sensibility, the ability to perceive something with the senses, that is, as an object in the world. Urban says, “if statements cannot be directly linked to the world in an unproblematic fashion, then is appears . . . that all is interpretation” (Urban 1996, xii). The cogency of Theosophical thought is that Theosophy is the “ancient wisdom”, a collection of fundamental truths about the universe. Theosophy is useful in people’s lives insomuch as it is valid and readily applicable to life. Urban argues that discourse must have an aspect of sensibility to convey meaning to listeners:

Speaking English is by itself not sufficient to allow you to recover the specific meanings associated with this physical object of experience. You must have a sensory encounter with it. There is, in other words, an
empirical condition for access to these meanings, even if there is a pre-empirical one in the language you speak. (Urban 1996, 5)

Urban goes on to say that language “is built up out of repeated encounters with discourse as a physical object, discourse such as is reflected in the text artifacts above, or in instances of actual speech” (Urban 1996, 5). Theosophy solves the problem of sensibility by encouraging students to study the texts and participate in the dialogue at meetings. By asking questions and getting answers, students are constantly negotiating the reality of Theosophy through interaction with the discourse as a sense object. Furthermore, students are encouraged to “test, check, and verify” the principles to determine if they hold true in one’s own life. This contributes to their reality as sense objects. The philosophy states that determining the principles to be true in one’s life is the only condition under which they should be accepted, but Urban would argue that making the discourse an object in one’s life, and thereby fulfilling the empirical condition for access to meaning, is the only way that these propositions can become imbued with meaning for an individual, and thus accepted as true.

The problem of sensibility is compounded by what Urban calls the “problematic of interconversion between sensibility and reference” (Urban 1996, xiv). Reference refers to the relationship between statements and their one-to-one linkage to an object in the world. This is a problem in Theosophy because many of the statements in the theosophical doctrines are impossible to access as objects in the world. In other words, the assertions about the world are impossible to test. As Laura points out, “it’s a question of testing but there are things you can’t test, except by analogy and correspondence, so . . . it’s a fine line.” This shows how ideas are given a reference in the world through discourse, and particularly through the testimony of others and the use of analogy and metaphor.
In his discussion of how Native South American communities gain access to the land of the dead through the dream narratives of individuals, Urban shows how the public can access parts of the world through the private experience of an individual:

The public has access to these parts of the world, but only through the sense of one individual. Everyone else gains access through the discourse of that individual. Discourse becomes a door through which parts of reality, otherwise closed to the public, can be opened. (Urban 1996, 216)

Meetings are very important in this sense because they provide the discursive framework for listening to the experiences of others to establish truth where the individual does not have the experience.

Because many of the theosophical principles are not incontestably true or false, Theosophists must adopt a new way of seeing and structuring the world in order to accept them as true (Lohrman 1989, 16). Although this occurs to some extent in daily life whenever we accept anything that we have not scientifically tested, it occurs to a great extent among Theosophists. In meetings, these alternate “ways of knowing” are imparted to new members through discourse. In one meeting, the Chair said, “there are degrees of learning that include direct observation, to know by inference or analogy, to know vicariously, or through direct perceptions, but only the Masters command this ability.” In another meeting, Sam, an older student, asked the group what the means are by which we know anything to be true. He went on to answer this question by stating, “first is experience—the use of our sense to test out the world, the second is testimony—our trust in others, and the third is the internal conviction when a point resonates in our hearts and minds.” This shows that although students are encouraged to test the principles in their own lives, they make use of the ways of knowing besides direct observation on a regular basis.
Because the content of Theosophy includes a lot of abstract principles with little reference to things that we can experience through our senses in a normal, waking state, analogy and metaphor are used extensively in the discourse at the ULT as means to understand the principles. When someone asked in a meeting how they could know if it is in them to become wise and realize the oneness of life, the Chair responded, “Draw analogies—is there a sense of existence?” The Chair then went on to answer the question herself by saying, “Yes, always . . . even in amnesiacs, even in the first seconds of wakefulness. This sense is shared.” The way in which Theosophists use analogy is similar to the way in which magicians use it, according to Luhrmann:

Magicians use analogy easily, not only to illustrate but to elucidate a theory of their environment and to conceptualize its nature. They do not behave as if analogy is merely a bridge to knowledge, but as if it itself is a way of knowing. (Luhrmann 1989, 171)

This assumption of the inferential validity of analogy, not just as a means for insight, but also as a means to know the world, is an example of the way in which the subjectivity of the new student to Theosophy is changed to accommodate the problem the sensibility in the teachings.

The issue of sensibility is intertwined with that of intelligibility, the other requisite for meaningful discourse. For sign vehicles to be instilled with meaning, they also must be intelligible to the subject. This is a problem in Theosophy because the texts are often quite abstruse. Although The Secret Doctrine by HPB is closest to the theosophical manifesto, the text used in meetings at the ULT is Judge’s The Ocean of Theosophy. It is a condensed and simplified version of The Secret Doctrine to provide greater intelligibility and hence, accessibility to the masses. The problem of intelligibility is consciously acknowledged by Theosophists, as Sam demonstrated at the commemorative meeting for William Q. Judge:
Judge’s genius was to take these ideas and express them in the language of the everyday person. He didn’t repeat them like a parrot, but expressed them in a way that’s practically applicable. That’s the best way to help and teach others. He imparted the ideas through simple reason and many examples, and was never dogmatic.

It is clear that from the beginning of the movement, Theosophists have developed discursive adaptations to overcome this problem. This idea is conveyed in The Ocean of Theosophy when William Q. Judge describes Theosophy by saying, “unfathomable in its deepest parts, it gives the greatest minds their fullest scope, yet, shallow enough at its shores, it will not overwhelm the understanding of a child” (Judge 1987, 1). Several discursive practices are used at the ULT to increase intelligibility, including the use of analogy, questioning, and the study approach.

In addition to encouraging others to use analogy to test the principles of Theosophy, analogy and metaphor are used rhetorically by speakers in meetings to illustrate an unfamiliar concept in a way that is familiar to all. In one meeting, Laura actually used an analogy to support the idea of using ways other than direct experience to know something. With reference to the way you learn calculus, she said:

To make it your own knowledge you must learn the principles by which it is solved. But it is not direct knowledge; you must trust the teacher. This is the same way in which we have to prove theosophical wisdom. We use the ancient wisdom and see if they [sic] all point to one fact.

I have stated elsewhere that the extent to which a student commands these rhetorical devices is the extent to which he or she has been successfully socialized into the theosophical worldview. Although this assumption is difficult to test, these examples show that older students explicitly tell younger ones the new way in which they are to see the world. Thus it seems that the change in subjectivity is in some ways on a conscious level.

In addition to the use of analogy, a discursive practice that I will refer to as ‘questioning’ is an important part of constructing sensibility as well as intelligibility. It is easy to understand
how intelligibility is improved through an explanation when a student asks a question and gets an answer from the platform. However, questioning is also a rhetorical device used by speakers to construct sensibility for the group. By posing a question to the audience, the question becomes a sense object in the world. Through subsequent grappling with the question and throwing out answers, students appropriate the idea as an object in their own personal world. The person on the platform subsequently accepts or rejects the responses from the audience, or frames their answers in a different manner, and through this negotiation the students are steered into the theosophical view of reality.

During one meeting, Laura asked the group what would be the steps necessary to build an airplane. Several individuals responded, but their answers for the first step did not satisfy her. Through her coaxing, Laura finally elicits the desired response. The final list she accepts is that first you need an idea, then a plan, then you modify the plan to your liking, and then you get the materials and tools, and then you construct it. She then asks the group what all of these steps have in common, and says that every step involves substance, that even an idea is a thing. She then relates this principle to the idea that all things have intelligence, even minerals and plants, even though it may be a different form of intelligence than we possess. By questioning the group and making them come to the correct conclusion, the illustration is more poignant. The idea becomes internalized in a way that would not happen if they were merely told.

In addition to questioning the group, I will argue that senior students sitting in the audience ask questions in meetings to which they already know the answer to improve overall group intelligibility. This practice solves several problems at once. First, by asking basic questions about Theosophy, new students will hear the answers to questions that they might have had but are too shy to ask. In addition, it is often necessary to know something about a
philosophy in order to be able to ask good questions about it. Senior students fill this void for those who are being exposed to the philosophy for the first time by asking the pertinent questions.

Although this is a difficult proposition to prove, my evidence for this assertion is two-fold. Firstly, it is a common occurrence for senior students who are not on the platform to ask a question and ultimately answer it themselves after receiving a response with which they are not satisfied. For example, in one meeting Jenny asked, “What does the Monad represent?” Michelle answered, “the Monad is the center of life. It is inside all life.” Jenny then followed this up with, “We could think of it as a unit of intelligence,” thereby answering her own question. Another exchange between Chris and Todd shows how this practice can be used to assess the knowledge of a younger student:

Chris: What is the vehicle of the higher mind on this plane?
Todd: I think it would be through the heart for the individual.
Chris: What part of manas does the mind relate to nature with?
Todd: Oh, the vehicle of the higher mind on this plane is nature. The lower mind is personality.

Chris was obviously not satisfied with Todd’s first answer, and asked another question to lead Todd to the correct response. The ambiguous motivation of this practice is characterized by another example of Chris asking a question of the part to which he already had a preconceived idea of the answer:

Chris: There must be another name for knowledge that can be assimilated into the Ego.
Todd: Are you asking me? It must be something along the lines of direct knowledge or intuition.
Mark: Wisdom.
Todd: Thank you.

Probably sensing Todd’s frustration with this line of questioning, Mark intervened with the answer. When Todd responded, “thank you,” he probably meant this in more ways than one.
This evidence strongly suggests that Theosophists make it a practice to ask questions to which they already know the answer in order to heighten the overall intelligibility of the doctrine for the group as a whole. My second proof for this statement is more subjective, as it is simply that senior students ask basic questions that even I could answer. It is not likely that on all of the occasions that I have witnessed this practice, those students were struck by temporary senility. One example of this is when the group was discussing ways the higher spiritual evolution of man. Mark asked, “Are there examples of people who have achieved this perfection?” These people are the Masters, and not only had the topic been covered extensively during the time that I attended meetings, but the concept that there exist perfected beings who guide humans by revealing the secret knowledge throughout their evolution is fundamental to Theosophy. It is clear in this context that Mark, a senior student of 15 years, was attempting to relate the information discussed in this particular meeting to other ideas in the philosophy that had not been discussed that day. It is also probably no coincidence that several new students were in attendance at this particular meeting.

Another adaptation to improve intelligibility is through the student approach. In one respect, simply attending meetings is not enough. Learning is an active process that involves personal study of the texts. Todd says, “I think that if you attend meetings and don’t study the texts you’ll never really learn anything. You’ll hear things, but that’s not how we learn, is it? We don’t learn by hearing things. We learn by doing things.” However, by also providing a forum for reading, discussing and summarizing the teachings in smaller parts, the ideas are reinforced and imparted in a way that may be easier to understand. When I told Sam that I am an anthropologist studying Theosophy, he thought it was great that I was exploring Theosophy from a student’s perspective, as it is easier to approach that way.
This problem of intelligibility is also mediated at the United Lodge through a humorous metadiscourse. Jokes are often made about the unintelligibility of HPB’s writings. At a Sunday bagel party, Molly told me that Garron was reading *The Secret Doctrine* straight through. Everyone who heard this chuckled, and Mark said for my benefit that this text is only approachable through study of small parts at a time. To this, Garron defensively added that that is what he is doing. At one point, Melinda was doing the Part in *The Ocean of Theosophy* that covers the septenary nature of the macrocosm (Chapter II, p. 14-18). This is an especially dense portion of the text, and after she had finished, Laura, who was the Chair, sarcastically remarked, “that’s clear.” As Luhrmann notes, “Jokes rely on shared knowledge and assumptions . . .” (Luhrmann 1989, 146). This humorous outlook on a potential problem forges a bond in common knowledge and serves to put the subject at ease by establishing a common point of reference from which to confront the texts.

**Translating the Philosophy into a Way of Life**

Finally, students at the United Lodge are faced with the problem of translating the meanings acquired through discourse into a way of acting within the world. In *Metaphysical Community*, Urban discusses the distinction between ‘constativity’ (talking about the world) and ‘performativity’ (doing something in the world) as observed by John Austin. He poses the question, “In what measure are claims of truth ways of accomplishing practical, rather than purely theoretical ends” (Urban 1996, xii)? According to the practice theory of anthropology, a transformation in subjectivity can influence action. Sherry Ortner says that “in terms of how the system constrains practice, the emphasis tends to be laid on essentially cultural and psychological mechanisms: mechanisms of the formation and transformation of ‘consciousness’”

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(Ortner 1994, 397). By changing the subjectivity of the individual, theosophical discourse alters the way a student acts in the world.

The fact that the theosophical texts pose a problem of intelligibility is in some ways adaptive for altering the subjectivity of the student. In describing his foray into Theosophy, John, a student of about five years, expressed that he experienced great confusion after attending his first few meetings. But he admitted that this aspect of Theosophy piqued his interest. He said that if it had not been challenging, he probably would have stopped coming to the meetings. Urban states that something that challenges our patterns of intelligibility leads us toward the sensible world, and for this reason it asks us to see for ourselves (Urban 1996, 22). This assertion is consistent with the Theosophical ethos and method for understanding the texts. Advocating the student approach is an adaptation to maximize intelligibility and elicit active participation in the process of understanding, the “seeing for ourselves.” Sam once said, “only through studying, testing, and checking, and testing these ideas and then teaching them to people who know less can we improve ourselves. If we see the value of these ideas, we can contribute service, time, or money to keep them going.”

By being asked to test the principles in one’s own life, it makes them seem more real (Luhrmann 1989, 142). Older students often repeat that nothing should be accepted on faith alone, so within the ethos of the movement, it is necessary to be skeptical to truly accept the ideas. Theosophy does not say that one has to believe in all the principles in order to live a good life (or to even be a good Theosophist), but only that one’s life will become more meaningful if the student accepts the principles and learns to live by them. By allowing the student this leeway and challenging him to test out the principles, it gives the student greater confidence that they may be true. The principles are difficult to understand, which requires a time investment. By
attempting to implement them in his life, the student learns to think in a theosophical manner, which then reinforces the teachings. When applied to life, the propositions may either be upheld, refuted, or impossible to test. If the Theosophical principles are supported, the student’s commitment to them will probably augment and his subjectivity will further alter.

In the case that the principles are found to be untestable or false, there are several escape clauses built into the philosophy. Many theosophical principles are metaphysical assertions about the immaterial. Science is only able to test the material realm, and thus claims about non-material realms will go unchallenged. In the case that claims are found to be untestable through empirical means, students are likely to rely on the other ways of knowing that Theosophy espouses, such as through the testimony of others and through analogy. Laura gives the example that in *The Secret Doctrine* we’re told that “the planet Venus is in her last round and that’s why it’s such a bright light in the sky. It shines with the light of the intelligences that are working on it and it is the older sister to the earth. . . .” Laura says that she has no way of proving or disproving this but maintains that “. . . because of the things I have been able to prove I trust that it might be so.” By providing anecdotes and testimony in meetings from their own lives, “actors not only continue to be shaped by the underlying organizational principles involved, but continually re-endorse those principles in the world of public observation and discourse.” Senior students lead by example, and in this way, they embody and hence reproduce the assumptions of the system (Ortner 1994, 398).

In the case that a theosophical claim is proved to be false, there are similar ways in which this issue can be overlooked. Because a student need not hold all of the principles to be a good Theosophist, the nature of the movement does not require that he discard the whole philosophy if
he disagrees with some of it. This is illustrated in Laura’s response when I asked her if she would give out an idea from the platform if she found it to be false in her own life:

Laura: You, you could say, ‘I don’t know. But I do know this is what Theosophy says.’ One of the things that, we are not a society, and that’s, that’s part of the real power of the United Lodge—that we have no constitution or by-laws, no rules, no officers, and what we’re giving out is Theosophy—not our opinion, not our understanding, not I agree with this.

Author: OK.

Laura: We’re saying, this is what Theosophy teaches. Now it’s up to you to do what you will with the ideas.

Laura said that in this way the acceptance of the ideas is on an internal and individual level. She says, “I have the right to my enthusiasm. I don’t have the right to tell you you can’t call yourself a Theosophist if you don’t believe this.” In this way, individual differences in belief can be accommodated while the movement as a whole is maintained. This also occurs when Theosophy disagrees with science on a specific matter. It has often been stated that whereas science uses the means available to it, Theosophy uses the means available to Theosophy, which happens to be the accumulated knowledge gathered throughout all of time and guarded by the Masters. Science may not have reached the same conclusion as Theosophy yet, but in time it will catch up to the knowledge possessed in the Theosophical teachings.

Part of the shift in subjectivity also arises when students become more knowledgeable in areas that relate to Theosophy. Once a student has learned the theosophical ways of framing experiences, he is more apt to understand experiences in terms of the philosophy. This can be seen with the ideas of karma and reincarnation. Present circumstances and life situations are said to be the result of past actions performed by the student. In this way, any situation, no matter how unfavorable, may be seen as something that is dictated by karma as a lesson that needs to be learned. This type of interpretational shift occurs frequently. For one, the desire to make the
world a better place might be motivated in part by the belief that one will eventually come to inhabit it again. The student adopts that attitude that he is privy to special knowledge about the world, and he must accept responsibility commensurate with this heightened knowledge (Hull 1993, 121).

Urban maintains that discourse in any community circulates, survives, and is reproduced because it helps that community exist in the world (Urban 1996, 10). He says, “They want a discourse that leads them into the world, that produces some benefit for them in their lives” (Urban 1996, 24). If this is true, then the subjectivity constructed through discourse at the ULT must confer benefits on students that help them exist in the world. By ingraining into the subject a world that is ruled by an impersonal law of causality, the person understands that she is responsible for her thoughts, speech, and actions. The philosophy allows for this translation to occur by stressing a type of agency that begins with thought and proceeds to action. Action is thought to stem from thought and speech, and the individual is held accountable for all manifestations of his intent throughout this process. Although the doctrine of karma is often misconstrued for fatalism, the discourse at the United Lodge makes it clear that this is not the case:

There is never an end to what you can accomplish. Both fate and free will are always operating. You have a free will but fate determines the conclusions. Fate is equal to what is coming in your future because of the consequences you step up through past actions. Free will is how you deal with your fate.

In another instance, Laura uses the analogy to demonstrate this principle. She says that in the case of putting your hand in a fire, fate has set up the opportunity for you to put your hand in the fire. However, you have the free will to put your hand in the fire or not, but if you do you can learn from the experience and not do it again. Theosophical discourse constructs a subjectivity in which accountability plays a major role. It is easy to see how this ethos can help students
accept whatever may happen, but encourages them to make the best of it by taking charge of their lives.

In this way, the philosophy stresses agency. Time and again it has come up in the discourse of meetings that each individual must begin by changing himself, and then he should try to help others to become better people also. When asked what the best way to put the teachings into practice is, Laura said that “the first way to implement Theosophy is in the formation of a universal brotherhood. The second is universal law.” We need to accept that whatever situations we encounter in life are lessons to be learned through the law of karma. “Accept this responsibility and use it as an opportunity for growth and learning.” Furthermore, Theosophy redefines the common good to be the common good of the whole interdependent community of planetary life (Hull 1993, 122). Students often have remarked that it is the duty of humans to lift up every other thing on the planet, because we are the only entities to have the ability to make choices according to self-conscious free will. On another occasion Laura said, “If you act on that basis that I am responsible and that I am a part of this body of humanity, body of life on the earth, I have to take care of everything I do inwardly and outwardly. Well if you start living that way, the authority, the religious authority becomes your own higher nature.” This illustrates how the ideas translate into a plan for action. Agency is demonstrated in one’s ability to implement the philosophy in the practices of his daily life.

Finally, although the goal of the theosophical movement is for individual spiritual growth, the United Lodge expresses its main goal as the dissemination of theosophical ideas. Laura says, “the Lodge is an association of individual student and thinkers that is motivated by the desire to give this information to the world.” Once one has helped himself, it is his duty to help others. Laura says that by giving away ideas you can share something with the world
without putting a hardship on yourself. When I asked her if it is akin to empowering someone, she said, “Exactly. You can’t, you can’t help somebody that you carry . . . But on the one side it’s the hope for all of us for the future, but on the other side it’s my responsibility to share . . . .” This sentiment is often echoed in meetings. One woman said that she like to direct people to the philosophy instead of having them come to her with problems. She remarks, “It’s better to make them self-reliant with Theosophy because maybe I don’t know a lot but I know that the knowledge is out there.”

Students are drawn to Theosophy because it has an answer for everything. Melinda told me that she has tried out several different religions. She said that each one answered more of her questions, but not all of them. She is finally satisfied with Theosophy because it provides a model for acting in every situation. Its principles are not bound in any one personage, and for this reason, they can transcend time. The discourse at meetings reinforces this, as new analogies make the texts relevant to modern life, and others students can suggest a way of handling every situation in a positive manner. In the surveys that I passed out, many students wrote that meetings are helpful for their ability to “provide you with insights you wouldn’t otherwise have.”

Theosophy is also an adaptive worldview to hold because it maintains that there is always an opportunity for positive change. Laura says that in this way the biggest change that Theosophy has made in her life is to give her hope:

Laura: It’s funny but I’m not sure I would’ve had quote, “a life” without it, because most of my life was spent passionately resenting what was happening in the world, especially with women and children.

Author: And not knowing how to deal with that?

Laura: Right. And not having the philosophical basis for it, you know? How can we here be throwing food away everyday when there are people that are watching their children die?

Author: Right.
Laura: And to me that's the most hopeless feeling in the world, so I was always brooding and raging and trying to understand, and philosophically I'm in a different place [now]. I still have that hunger to serve and to help, but I realize that you do it where you are and help influence and change things from where you are. I have, I am no longer hopeless.

Although the concept of detached action might be problematic if it is taken to mean passivity, this misconception is often corrected through discourse at meetings:

Each one of us is a ray of universal mind. You can't stand still. Life is motion—you're always moving up or down. The mind reflecting is not passivity, but daydreaming is passivity because you're not deciding anything.

This call to action from Laura shows that knowledge and activity of mind is only useful insofar as it will translate into action. The concept that knowledge must be converted into something useful is often formulated by students at the Lodge as the difference between "knowledge" and "wisdom." Once knowledge becomes wisdom, one can not help but to act in accordance with this understanding and insight.

Furthermore, students must take a proactive stance if they want to change for the better. This is illustrated by an exchange at a meeting in which Mark was the Chair:

Sam: How is it [karma] both impersonal and yet merciful?

Mark: What is mercy?

Denise: We're not given more than we can handle.

Betty: I think that not retaliating to being wronged is being merciful.

Mark: It is merciful because we have a different body and brain everytime. We're not weighed down by everything we've ever done. There is always an opportunity for change, something better.

Sam: There is never a final judgment.

There is always a chance for something better, but only through good choices and responsible action. Theosophists often criticize other religious groups for worshipping insightful figures
without attempting to emulate their lifestyle. Sam explains how the hope of the movement is linked to one’s agency:

We don’t have to develop peace, happiness, and joy because it’s already there. What needs to be developed is the capacity to understand our mind. Check and verify with the ancient principles to discover truth and allow the peace of mind to come through and permeate our everyday life.

Thus, hope for one’s life is always embedded in the idea that it is possible to take control and change the world by changing yourself.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate through ethnographic analysis how the discourse in meetings at the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia changes the subjectivity of new students. Urban shows how the social function of the theosophical worldview, when embodied in discourse, is to maintain the whole culture of Theosophy:

From the point of view of discourse, it is possible that the collection of instances in some measure functions in this way [to maintain the culture], especially, for example, when there is a circulating metadiscursive ideology of continuity with the past, coupled with an ideology of sharing, making it appear as if the history of instances is a history of sameness and replication over time and space. (Urban 1991, 18)

Indeed, the metadiscursive ideology of Theosophy is that it is an ancient wisdom handed down through the ages and maintained by a group of enlightened beings. Furthermore, it is the duty of the ULT, and Theosophists everywhere, to share this body of knowledge with others. In this way, the discursive adaptations at the ULT are well suited not only to change the subjectivity of new students, but in doing so, to maintain the group culture.

I have shown that framing the theosophical pursuit as both religious and scientific is a first step in constructing a subjectivity that allows for students to be at ease with an ethos that espouses not accepting anything on faith and yet makes claims about things that cannot be tested.
The discourse at the ULT is impregnated with in-group terms relating to specific parts of the discourse, and several of these suggest the theosophical principles. I then demonstrated how discursive practices serve to construct and maintain social organization, by laying out the way in which other in-group terms serve provide metadiscursive labels for the social hierarchy at the ULT. These represent levels of increasingly restricted access that depend on the level of internalization of Theosophy, which, in turn, is a function of seniority and affinity for the ideas.

Through the analysis on becoming a member of the Lodge, I have shown that true membership in the group does not depend on filling out a membership card, but rather by learning the common knowledge shared by the group. This involves the ability to reproduce the discourse by teaching other students, which is affirmed by beginning to do platform work at meetings. Internalization of the theosophical worldview is also measured in terms of the adoption of specific discursive practices, such as refraining from using personal names in meetings as well as abstaining from using first personal singular personal pronouns. It also includes special pronunciations of certain words. All of these changes are evidence of a changing subjectivity.

I have shown that while sensibility and intelligibility are necessary for the theosophical discourse to circulate, these aspects pose problems for the ULT. However, they too, are mediated through discursive adaptations. The texts and the meetings are inseparable in this respect, for the texts serve to ground the discourse and maintain continuity in the ideas over time, but the discourse makes the texts relevant to modern life. The principles of Theosophy are made sensible through analogy and the practice of ‘questioning’. Furthermore, the student approach and the humorous metadiscourse regarding the unintelligibility of the texts help to assuage the problem of intelligibility.
The student's subjectivity is changed through a process of constant negotiation. In this process, he adopts new ways of seeing and structuring the world, such as the reliance on analogy and the testimony of others in accepting ideas that are impossible to test. This change in subjectivity then structures the way in which students act in the world at large. The problem of intelligibility asks student to "see for themselves". In order to do so, they must become more knowledgeable about Theosophy, thus strengthening their commitment to the ideas. With the acceptance of the theosophical principles, the student is instilled with the desire to act responsibly to help herself and finally, to help others. One way in which this can be done is to disseminate Theosophy. Ultimately, the philosophy is beneficial as a model for acting in the world because it provides the student with the perspective that no matter what circumstances she may encounter, there is always hope for positive change.

It is a danger inherent in the anthropological quest that by dissecting and analyzing any aspect of culture, it becomes vulnerable to criticism. While anthropologists endeavor to elucidate the native viewpoint, by constructing an academic interpretation of culture we necessarily drift from the way in which it is understood by natives. It has not been my intention to in any way imply that the teachings of Theosophy and their expression at the United Lodge in Philadelphia are invalid or unfounded any more so than any other propositions that we hold to be true. A similar study of the way in which scientific principles come to be accepted would probably reveal the same interpretive processes. On the contrary, it is my goal to illuminate the way in which these beliefs come to be held, and why they benefit the students who come to believe them.

One of my strongest intellectual problems with theosophical thought is the assertion that many of the untestable claims that comprise the theosophical worldview are the accumulated
wisdom of the ages that has been passed down through hidden Masters. Theosophists says that although we may not be in the position to test these assertions today due to the rise and decline of knowledge in various periods of evolution, science will eventually catch up and come into agreement with the theosophical propositions. While many religions make claims that their propositions are untestable and thus articles of faith, Theosophy is confident that science will eventually agree with their claims.

As a product of a secular, positivist education it is counter-intuitive for me to take stock in a claim that there is a better system of knowing than science. Yet during the time of my fieldwork at the ULT I was continually humbled by the evidence in support of this theosophical claim. Most of the straight-line Theosophical texts used at the Lodge were written in the late 1800’s. Even since this time period, several of the theosophical propositions that seemed ridiculous at the time have already become acceptable theories in science of today. For example, Theosophy says that the universe has gone through numerous periods of evolution. Although the Big Bang theory was once the accepted scientific theory for the formation of the universe, it is seen as equally possible in modern astrophysics that there may have been many cycles of formation and collapse of the universe. Theosophists have also been proponents of the interconnectedness of all things, living and non-living, and the influence that we can have on these things on a sub-atomic level. Quantum physics seems to be in agreement with this theory, as the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle states that the act of observation actually influences sub-atomic particles.

For anthropologists, the example that hits closest to home in this respect has to do with the age of humankind. *The Ocean of Theosophy* states that the age of man “as he is now formed is now formed is over eighteen millions of years” (Judge 1987, 20). When we covered this topic
in a meeting my first thought was that this figure was outlandish. In my college education I had learned that the earliest Australopithecine fossil found to date was about five million years old. However, Sam assured me that the theosophical figure was a product of the types of records that were available to Theosophists. Someday science would catch up, as it has already been demonstrated that science keeps pushing its date back further and further as new fossils have been found throughout the history of modern archaeology. To my surprise, a couple of months later it was announced that a new fossil had been found in Africa, dating tentatively to about six million years ago, which is actually morphologically closer to the modern human form. These examples serve to remind us not to discount the idea that there may be others forms of knowledge unavailable to the world of academia, and that even "science" is another system of belief.

Although I did not set out in this paper to address the reasons for which students first become interested in the theosophical ideas, it is clear that the spirit of inquiry is a strong motivating factor. Many students of Theosophy were disillusioned with organized religion for its reliance on dogma, worship of tradition, and inability to address modern issues. Theosophy sets out to explain not only the material realm, but every realm of existence. It encourages its students to test out its principles, but until they have become Masters, the way in which they can assess the validity of these principles may be imperfect. I can only hope that this paper has lived up to that spirit of inquiry, and will be another step in the pursuit of truth. For as the Theosophists say, "there is no religion higher than the truth."
Students at the United Lodge of Theosophists in Philadelphia generally recognize Blavatsky and William Q. Judge to be the founders of the Theosophical Movement.

2 Pseudonyms have been used for all names. In general, demographic data has been avoided, as it is not necessary for the analysis and could serve to betray the identity of the students at the ULT.

3 The terms 'older' and 'younger' are relative terms used to refer to a student's numbers of years studying Theosophy. Although in many cases they may also correspond with age, the terms are used to refer to experience with Theosophy, not age.

4 From this point forward, when one of these terms is capitalized it is referring to the person who fulfills this role (i.e. 'the Part'). When it is in lower case (i.e. 'the part') it denotes the thing.

5 In a survey that I gave to students at the Lodge, one student also noted the Junior Chair as a fifth distinctive category that is appropriately one step under the Chair. Since I was previously unaware of this position and am not sure of the capacity in which the Junior Chair acts, I have not included it in my model of social organization.
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