

# On Space

## Part 1 of 2

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I have received, recently, a letter bringing to the foreground certain very important and abstruse questions. I shall quote from part of what was said within this letter:

The space question has puzzled me for some time, and I'm always eating my words—imitating father Kronos—when I try to come to a definitive interpretation of some terms in *The Secret Doctrine*. What I am referring to is the use made of 'space' in the fundamentals and in the prior discussion in which it is referred to as *Anupadaka*. In the fundamentals, it is as "absolute Abstract Space," one of the two aspects of Be-ness—Matter as opposed to Spirit, Matter primordial. It is also identified from the *Glossary* as *Mulaprakriti*, undifferentiated substance, and *Akasha*.<sup>1</sup> On page 8, HPB says, the All is ". . . like Space, which is its only mental and physical representation on this earth. . ."<sup>2</sup> So it seems to me, we have two kinds of symbolism at work. Since I have been teaching the skepticism course, I have been treating metaphysics with great caution, thinking of them as having two handles—as Epictetus might have said—one by which they can be borne and the other by which they cannot. I certainly don't want to be more skeptical than Nagarjuna. I don't believe that is a dangerous wish.

Two questions are brought to our attention in this letter: the first is that of what is the meaning of 'space' when conceived as the Root of all that is? How is this to be understood? Second, what is the significance of the skepticism of Nagarjuna, or rather as I would put it, the negative presentation which is so characteristic of his writings? I shall take up the second question first and later consider the more important, as I conceive it, question of the significance of space when viewed as the Root of all.

A form which occurs in *sutras*, which I believe are derived from Nagarjuna, which leaves one in quite a quandary at his first seeing of them, is a statement which runs this way: a denial of *being* and then a denial of *non-being* followed by a denial of both *being* and *non-being* and a denial of neither *being* or *non-being*. We could state this in more abstract language, for this is a form not only applied to the conception of 'being' in the literature. Let us substitute the letter *a* for being, and our negative statement takes this form: there is neither *a* nor *not-a*, nor is there both *a* and *not-a*, nor neither *a* and *not-a*. This seems to produce an effect like the assertion of an absolute nihilism, like saying that

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<sup>1</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Co., Los Angeles, 1892), 218.

<sup>2</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Adyar: The Theosophy House, 1888), 37.

nothing whatsoever is; and it may well be that formulations like this have been responsible for the interpretation of so many who have viewed Buddhism as teaching an absolute nihilism. But, if we study what is presented in this negation more carefully, I think we can see that it is not a negation of all possibility of a reality, but rather a statement concerning the universe of discourse.

In logical practice, we conceive of the universe of discourse as a dichotomy which contains all things, all ideas, all existences that possibly are; and we will say that all things are either *a* or *not-a* and, thus, pretend to have included all that possibly can be. But a certain point is overlooked, for what we are dealing with is a conception—not with reality as it is in itself—but a system of conceptions organized in the form of a dichotomy. We are dealing, thus, only with objects of consciousness. We are not dealing with the absolute All in itself, but only with objects of consciousness. Self-analysis brings out the fact that the object of consciousness stands in relation to its own other, which is a subject to consciousness, and that these two stand in a relationship of consciousness to each other. We have, therefore, not contained in the dichotomy of the universe of discourse the whole of that which in some sense is, but only that which exists as an object before consciousness, and in this case, as a conceptual object before consciousness, which, note well, is not the same as a pure perceptual object in its uninterpreted immediacy, nor is it the self or subject which stands behind cognition, nor the consciousness itself. We're dealing only with a conceptual field, and have made the error of viewing the concept as identical with its referent.

This, then, would be the critique I would suggest: that what is being negated in this form is the identification of reality with a conceptual object; and what is being suggested by the dialectical process is that the conceptual object is not the reality, and, further, that not any object, in any sense, whether perceptual or conceptual, is the whole of reality.

Analysis will enable us to see that this is of necessity true, for the universe of discourse is itself no more than a conception in my mind—a conception held within my consciousness. It does not contain the self that cognizes nor the consciousness. To be sure, I may produce a concept of consciousness and it would contain that concept, but it would not contain the consciousness as it is in itself; and, likewise, I can produce a concept of the self, such as *Atman* or *Paramatman*, yet, that concept, though contained within the universe of discourse as a concept, nonetheless, is not captured within that universe of discourse in its reality as it is in itself. Viewed from this standpoint, it would appear that what Nagarjuna is denying is that the real can be achieved as an objective existence before consciousness, but it is not a denial that there is a reality, in some sense; but that it has to be known or realized by some other method than by conceptual ratiocination.

There is the further thought that Nagarjuna was negating the validity of conceptual or logical thought—that he was seeking to achieve a thought-less type of consciousness. I think we can see that this is not a valid implication, for when one analyzes the negation of the neither *a* nor *not-a*, it is equivalent to a positive statement with respect to conceptual cognition as such. In other words, that to negate conceptuality is not the truth as seen by him. If one goes into other Buddhistic sources, he will find this confirmed. I now direct your attention to a work by Lama Anagarika Govinda entitled

*The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy*, and in the Forward on p. 10, note this quotation:

The Buddha insisted that his doctrine should not merely be accepted in blind faith, but only after proper investigation, in which reason and experience played an equal role. That this balance was not always maintained in later times, is illustrated by the fact that when reason prevailed over experience, it deteriorated into dry scholasticism, and when experience was divorced from reason, it gave rise to wrong interpretations and superstition. Though reason is not the final judge of reality, and logic not the only approach towards truth—yet, as long as we live in the realm of sense-perception and conceptual thought, we have to make use of these faculties as the necessary tools in our attempt towards deeper understanding of the world in which we live and our own position in it. Since our consciousness and the faculties of thinking and reflecting, which characterize and distinguish the human being from all lower forms of life, have evolved from the universal matrix, we have to conclude that the laws which govern these faculties, must reflect to some extent and conform with the laws of the universe—a conclusion that seems to be borne out by the capacity of the human mind to formulate laws that correctly foretell the movements of celestial bodies or the reactions of chemical elements or the behaviour of protons and electrons in nuclear compositions on the basis of pure mathematical principles. In other words: though reality goes beyond human reason, it does not necessarily contradict it.<sup>3</sup>

This, I would say, is a preeminently reasonable position. A little more light is thrown upon this position by a further quotation concerning the type of questions which can be answered and those which cannot. This quotation is taken from the same volume, and is to be found on pages 42 and 43. The division of the questions is as follows:

1. Questions which can be answered *directly*, i.e. by Yes or No.  
Example: Do all living beings die? Yes, they all must die.
2. Questions which can be answered with *reservation* only.  
Example: Will all beings be reborn? Yes and No; those who have not yet overcome their passions will be reborn, those who have destroyed them will not be reborn.
3. Questions which need a *counter-question*.  
Example: Is man strong or weak?  
Counter-question: In relationship to whom? – Compared with animals, man is strong; compared with the forces of higher beings (devas) he is weak.
4. Questions which *cannot be answered*. – These are the famous fourteen questions which the Buddha refused to answer:

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<sup>3</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1961), 10.

- (1-4): Is the world constant? – Or not? – Or both? – Or none of both?
- (5-8): Is the world limited in time? – Or not? – Or both? – Or none of both?
- (9-12): Does the Tathagata exist after death? – Or not? – Or both? – Or none of both?
- (13-14): Are life and body identical or not?

And the text goes on to say:

Though the subject-matter of this last type of questions ('world,' 'Tathagata,' 'life') is infinite in its nature, it has been represented by concepts which, according to the laws of their origin, are limited and subject to the limitations of three-dimensional, i.e. finite logic. Therefore no suitable answer can be given.

And then the question arises:

But how can we know the Infinite? 'I answer,' says Plotinus, 'not by reason. It is the office of reason to distinguish and define. The infinite, therefore, cannot be ranked among its objects. You can only apprehend the infinite by a faculty superior to reason, by entering into a state in which you are your finite self no longer.'<sup>4</sup>

What, then, is implied from this is that the pattern suggested by Nagarjuna in which *being* and *non-being* are completely denied applies only to the metaphysical type of question so far as Buddhism is concerned. And there is a good reason why this should be so, as suggested by the quotation taken from Plotinus.

However, in partial modification of the statement of Plotinus, I'd bring out this fact: that today, in the development of mathematics, we have developed a logic which cannot be compressed within the limits of our formal logic. And it is quite evident that Nagarjuna is speaking in terms of that formal logic, as he is using the universe of discourse that is characteristic of formal logical thinking. By formal logic, I mean the logic left to us by Aristotle, and is the common logic that is studied in the schools. But we have found that this is not the whole of logic, and is not adequate to explain mathematical processes. I would refer you to the *Principles of Mathematics* by Bertrand Russell, as well as other works of this kind. And, indeed, mathematics does deal most of the time with propositions that involve the infinite; and so for this purpose the formal logic of Aristotle is inadequate.

I will illustrate this by a reference to the transfinite numbers, conceptions for which we are indebted to Dedekind and Cantor, in which it is pointed out that certain properties that are characteristic of finite sets are no longer true of infinite sets. Thus, we would say that a proper part of a finite set—meaning by a proper part, a part that lacks certain elements that are in the original set—has always a smaller cardinality than the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

original set. But in infinite sets, we know today that proper parts may be taken which have a cardinality equal to that of the original set; and this is almost like entering a fairy-land of another world of thought.

Actually, many of the metaphysical conceptions that have come down from the Orient follow a pattern that would fit this kind of logic. Thus, when it is said by Shankaracharya, for instance, that when the entity attains the state of Liberation, he finds himself identical with *Brahman*; but, as Shankara has pointed out, he is not identical simply with a part of *Brahman*, but is identical with the whole of *Brahman*. And this, then, is not simply true of one individual or one entity, but of all entities. It fits perfectly our logic of the transfinite. And we know today that an infinite set is such that an infinite number of subsets, that is, proper parts, can be subtracted from the original set and not reduce its cardinality at all.

This is obviously a very different kind of thinking, and so far as I know, such patterns of logic did not exist in the ancient Orient. And I do submit that by reason of this greater comprehension of logic we are able to say today certain things of a metaphysical nature without violating the norm of this logic of the infinite. And, therefore, I would say that in the light of this development in mathematics, which is of all things the most rational, I would have to disagree with Plotinus when he, in effect, restricts reason to an exclusively finite domain. I would change his statement in this regard, namely, that the All, the Ultimate, the final Truth can be realized, but not through the use of conceptual processes by themselves. It calls for the emergence of a different function or way of cognition. And as I have had certain experiences of this sort, I can say it is indeed true that the conceptual patterns that are characteristic of finite logic, or the logic in the formal sense of deductive and inductive logic, is inadequate; that at the time of a state of Realization, one finds that many of the questions of a metaphysical type of orientation are answered simply by disappearing. They cease to be valid questions. They are questions based upon certain assumptions that are not true of the Ultimate. There is another way of cognition.

I might suggest this with a kind of figure. It is as though the dichotomy of the universe of discourse, which is so common in formal logic, may be likened unto a three-dimensional room that is closed on all sides. It would seem to a consciousness that was only three-dimensional that the dichotomy had embraced every possibility whatsoever. But if we introduce the notion of a fourth or higher dimensions, we would find that the apparently completely enclosed three-dimensional room actually had a wide opening in it, that not everything was comprehended within it, that there were other doors of possibility that simply were not available to an imagination which was restricted to three-dimensional conceptions. I can testify to the fact that this is true to the experience as I knew it first in 1936.

To sum up the discussion of the second question that was raised in the letter quoted at the beginning of this discourse, I would say that the negative formulations of Nagarjuna, and the silence of the Buddha with respect to metaphysical questions, does not constitute a formulation or expression of skepticism nor of a nihilistic point of view, but is simply a destructive analysis of a particular function of our consciousness—destructive in the sense that that function, which is here the function of conceptual cognition, is inadequate for the formulation of an answer to the metaphysical questions that were raised. The negative position, or the silent position of the Buddha, is not a denial of a reality. It's a denial of the

adequacy of a conceptual function, one of our psychological functions. There is another function referred to when the Enlightenment of the Buddha is mentioned. Buddhism begins, not with the birth of the Buddha, but with his Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Concerning the content of that Enlightenment, he generally was silent; but, he produced a program of action and of attitude, of conduct, and so forth, which was designed to lead the aspirant to an Enlightenment of his own. Unfortunately, the negative statement, which we are justified in viewing as only a critique of the limits of conceptual cognition by itself, was often interpreted as a negative view concerning the existence of a reality *per se*. And that, I submit, is not at all the meaning or the intent of the Great Teacher and of those Arhats who followed him. That I think is enough for the discussion of this second question; let us now consider the first question concerning space.

Preliminary to this discussion, the fact should be noted that I am using the third edition of *The Secret Doctrine* with which I have worked for more than fifty years. Although I am well aware of certain alterations that have been made in this edition, nonetheless, it has had for a long time the advantage of a very extensive index, and I therefore employ it. But it implies a different pagination from the first edition and that should be borne in mind.

Now, dealing with the subject of space, this might be a good formulation of the question: what is the meaning of 'space' when conceived as Root of all that is? At first, quite naturally, this does not seem to make very much sense. For if we take our common impression of space, it seems to us like an external void which serves as the receptacle of all things, as defined in the dictionary; and how could a real void be the Root of all things is a question which naturally arises in our mind. But, as we shall see later, this is only one meaning attaching to the conception of space, and there is implied in the conception a good deal more than just this. If one looks through the index to *The Secret Doctrine*, he will find that there are between two and three hundred references under the head of 'space', and, so far as I know, there is no subject in the whole volume that is given so many references. The importance of the conception is indicated by a quotation from a footnote on p. 359, volume 1, of the third edition. This is the very last clause at the bottom of the page:

. . . Space is the ever Unseen and Unknowable Deity, in our philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

It is, thus, representative of the most ontological conception of all; and that is why it is so important.

Now, it is pointed out in the letter that several of the quotations were taken from the discussion of the first fundamental principle. This is to be found on p. 42 and proceeds as follows:

An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable PRINCIPLE, on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and can only be dwarfed by any human expression or

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<sup>5</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 359.

similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought—in the words of the *Mandukya*, “unthinkable and unspeakable.”<sup>6</sup>

A further statement in explanation of this is found in the following paragraph:

To render these ideas clearer to the general reader, let him set out with the postulate that there is One Absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned Being. This Infinite and Eternal Cause—dimly formulated in the “Unconscious” and “Unknowable” of current European philosophy—is the Rootless Root of “all that was, is, or ever shall be.” It is of course devoid of all attributes and is essentially without any relation to manifested, finite Being. It is “Be-ness” rather than Being, Sat in Sanskrit, and is beyond all thought or speculation.<sup>7</sup>

Our question arises in connection with this discussion that strikes us right away. It is stated that it is both “Unconscious” and “Unknowable,” but these words are placed in quotes, and, thus, implying that that is not the statement of the writers of *The Secret Doctrine*. One very quickly recognizes the “Unconscious” as derived from the philosophy of von Hartmann in his volume *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* and the “Unknowable” as derived from the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. The implication is that this statement is not adequate. Later we will find in a *sutra* left us by Padma Sambhava, that the Root Principle was referred to as the “One Mind,” and as was pointed out in the commentary of Dr. Jung to *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, the use of the “One Mind” by Padma Sambhava is really a reference to what we call in modern psychology the “collective unconscious”—perhaps only in the deeper side of that collective unconscious—and that it is there viewed as a form of consciousness without a cognizing self or a consciousness that is not centered around a self. The question of whether it is unconscious or not, again is a question that depends upon how “consciousness” is employed as a concept.

There is such a thing as an inversion of consciousness whereby that which is unconscious to our normal state of consciousness becomes conscious so that the implication is not that, in fact, this is unconscious or strictly unknowable. In a certain statement made by one of the authors of *The Secret Doctrine*, in the tenth letter of *The Mahatma Letters*, it is stated that in the methodology employed by the Brothers, they are not allowed to assume the possibility of anything if they do not know it. In other words, they are not allowed to employ the postulational technique of modern science, but must first know before they can employ a conception, or at least know that to which the conception points. This, then, means that we are forced to modify the statements here to a certain degree when it says that it’s “unthinkable and unspeakable” and “transcends the power of human conception.” To be sure, it transcends conception, but does not therefore transcend, necessarily, knowability if we once grant the idea that there are other functions of cognition beside those of conceptuality and thought. Therefore, we are not to view this

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 42.

first fundamental as merely an invented postulate, but as *known* in some sense—but in a sense other than that of conception and thought.

The second paragraph following the formulation of the first fundamental in *The Secret Doctrine* will give us the particular reference referred to in the letter, and this we will now consider. I shall quote it:

This Be-ness is symbolized in the *Secret Doctrine* under two aspects. On the one hand, absolute Abstract Space, representing bare subjectivity, the one thing which no human mind can either exclude from any conception, or conceive of by itself. On the other, absolute Abstract Motion representing Unconditioned Consciousness. Even our Western thinkers have shown that consciousness is inconceivable to us apart from change, and motion best symbolizes change, its essential characteristic. This latter aspect of the One Reality, is also symbolized by the term “the Great Breath,” a symbol sufficiently graphic to need no further elucidation. Thus, then, the first fundamental axiom of the SECRET DOCTRINE is this metaphysical ONE ABSOLUTE—BE-NESS—symbolized by finite intelligence as the theological Trinity.

Now, we have right here this point first of all: “absolute Abstract Space, representing bare subjectivity. . .” Just what would we mean by an *absolute* and an *abstract space*. Space, as we ordinarily view it, as this emptiness in which all things seem to be contained, might seem abstract enough; but let us stop and think, is it wholly without concrete properties? Here I shall direct your attention to one of the most important and startling theses of the relativity theory of Albert Einstein, and that is that this space of the apparent outer world of planets, stars, galaxies, and so forth, that this space is not a characterless vacuum unaffected by the presence or absence of objects in it, but rather that space itself is distorted by the presence of a concentration of matter, as that of a star, so that the shortest line in such a space is not the Euclidean conception of a straight line, but is a line which becomes distorted because of the distortion of space. The notion is perhaps weird to most, but, nonetheless, we must bear in mind that observations since the original formulation of the theory of relativity have tended generally to confirm it. What this means, then, is that this space of ours, as it seems to be, is not really an abstract space, is not really an absolute space, but in a certain sense a *concrete* space having a determinant character which is affected by the presence of concentrations of matter within it. Therefore, I think we can see that there is ground for differentiating space in an *abstract* and perhaps *absolute* sense from this our familiar *perceptual space*, if you’ll permit me to call it that. This space, then, conceived in the sense of being *absolute* and *abstract*, would be a completely “void” space, in our sense of the word—unaffected by the presence or absence of objects within it. But this, here, is not the Ultimate Reality, as stated in the paragraph quoted, but a symbol of an aspect of the Ultimate Reality, and that aspect is there stated as being “bare subjectivity.” This, now, becomes very interesting indeed. *Bare subjectivity* appears as bringing us to something of the Ultimate which is simply symbolized by “absolute Abstract Space.”

Now, what do we mean by ‘subjectivity’? The first impression that arose in my mind, and I think naturally would arise in one’s mind, that subjectivity refers to a subject;



but a subject is the most important aspect of the conception of a self, at least in the epistemological sense. Now, we come into a problem of some difficulty. Is the notion of *self* ontological? And here a question arises: in the Buddhistic philosophy, the whole notion of a *permanent self*, that is a *self* that is of ontological value, and the notion of a *soul* which is of ontological value, are tabooed radically, so much so that one feels at times as though for a Buddhist, particularly of the southern school, the words *self* and *soul* are simply four letter dirty words. Now, it so happens that the three authors of *The Secret Doctrine* are acknowledged Buddhists in their personal orientation. Do we then have here, on the ontological level, a reference to a permanent subject? The dictionary, I think, gives us the resolution of this problem, for *subjectivity* does not simply mean a reference to a subject, in the sense of a *self*, a cognizing *self*, but even in its very first meaning gives us the following: "...the absence of objective reality." So, it's a reference to, in this case, to a *state* rather than to an ontological subject, and this interpretation would be consonant with the general outlook of the Buddhistic philosophy.

To suggest what we mean by *bare subjectivity*, let us think of what happens to us as we go to sleep. One, if he watches the process as he is falling asleep, he finds that he has discarded all directed thinking—otherwise he probably never would fall asleep—and in its place there is an undirected movement of image thoughts that become weaker and weaker until at about the point of loss of relative consciousness, it is as though there were a complete voidness of all objectivity whatsoever. Here, then, a state of potential awareness without any content, and I think that we may take this as being the meaning of *bare subjectivity*. There is another point to bear in mind, and that is this: in using the term *bare subjectivity*, we're using a term that has psychological reference; in other words, a reference to the quality of consciousness, not a reference to anything objective—anything that might be called a "thing" or even an object of consciousness—but to the bare subject of consciousness.

The point is further reinforced by reference to the second symbol, that is, on the other hand, this ultimate is represented or symbolized by "...absolute Abstract Motion representing Unconditioned Consciousness." And this brings our object down into the clearest kind of perspective. The Ultimate is not "Motion." It is not "absolute Abstract Space." It is "bare subjectivity" and "Unconditioned Consciousness," so that the "absolute Abstract Space" and the "absolute Motion" are only symbols of it. And right here we are getting into the very meat of our ontological values. They are "Unconditioned Consciousness" and "bare subjectivity"—that these are the base from which all else comes.

This, then, is in complete conformity with the position of Padma Sambhava in *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* wherein which he says the Ultimate is the One Mind; but not using the word 'mind' in the sense we use it, as Dr. Jung has pointed out, but in a sense that is more in accordance with the *collective unconscious* of our modern psychology. The One Mind is a psychological fact, and, in fact, Padma Sambhava's approach is called a psychological approach.

The heart of the matter, then, is that the Ultimate from which all comes is an Unconditioned Consciousness. But an Unconditioned Consciousness is not a relationship between a knower and a known. It, rather, is a Consciousness which pre-exists, and the knower and the known are derivative. The implication, then, is that at the Root of all is not the notion of *entity*—which is the usual meaning attached to words like that of God,

Yahweh, Allah, and Brahma—but the Ultimate is a *principle*, an essence, as it were; in other words, Pure Consciousness, but not consciousness in our ordinary sense, not consciousness as mere relationship, rather, Consciousness as the Universal Container, and, therefore, the easy transition to the notion of *space* as representing it. In my terminology, it is Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject. But it is more than merely a relationship, let me repeat, and it is not empty. There is another aspect to it, and that is an aspect which we might call *substantial*.