

Theosophical Duty as an Alternative to the Risk Society

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Abstract

The risky nature of modern civilization finds one of its alternatives and possibilities for overcoming in the theosophical understanding of the duty of the individual to society. This is the thesis of the proposed article. The thesis is defended by comparing elements of the concept of “Risk Society” by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck and the understanding of duty and politics in Helena Blavatsky’s latest work *The Key to Theosophy*. The seemingly paradoxical comparison is argued with the need to find new ways and approaches to overcome the crisis of humanity, which has not yet been able to take advantage of the best achievements and ideas of its great minds over the centuries to this day. Personal change in the direction of high morality and responsibility to all and everything leads to a change in society – this is the main conclusion that is made in the article.

Keywords: risk society, duty, theosophy, personal change, Ulrich Beck, Helena Blavatsky.

1. Introduction

This article hypothesizes that a theosophical understanding of the personal duty to society may be one of the possible alternatives for overcoming the risky nature of modern civilization¹. This hypothesis is supported by evidence of the risky nature of modern civilization, the need to find footholds in previously unexplored areas of knowledge, the new directions of scientific research. The main elements of the concept of Risk Society by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck are presented, as well as the theosophical understanding of duty. As a result, the conclusion is formulated that the individual duty to society, as interpreted by this ethical concept in Helena Blavatsky’s latest book *The Key to Theosophy*, is closely and inextricably linked with the personal change of the individual in the direction of high morality and responsibility to everyone and everything that in the long run leads to a positive change in society as a whole and its transformation into a community of mutual assistance, support, compassion, and unity. The utopian nature of this hypothesis can be criticized and thus enriched, but its rationality is worth discussing and studying.

¹ By “civilization” here is meant humanity as a whole with all the elements of its life - social order, culture, science, and regardless of the differences between countries and societies.

Placing a plane for the study of elements of two large and seemingly different areas of human knowledge – theosophy as a synthesis of cosmogenesis² and anthropogenesis³ different from those accepted in science, and Risk Society as a socio-philosophical concept of the state of modern humanity, in the first look seems paradoxical and contradictory. The apparent paradoxes stem mainly from the metaphysical nature of Theosophy and the extremely specific dimensions of the Risk Society. Despite these – fundamentally formal differences – the two areas of knowledge have the same substantive subject – man and the development of his consciousness. As in the theosophical doctrine of Helena Blavatsky, so in Ulrich Beck's concept of the world as a society of risk, are led by the monistic principle – consciousness and the body are ontologically inseparable, as the mind and spirit are leading, now the physical body. This approach is easier to find and justify in Blavatsky's works, but a careful analysis of the Risk Society shows that the concept of Reflexive Modernity, formulated by Ulrich Beck, unfolds in such a discourse – leading the human consciousness of the late '20s and the beginning of the 21st century. A consciousness that not only responds to ever-increasing risk situations in all spheres of life, but that seeks ways and means to deal with the reality of risk, and at the same time opens to others and to the world, overcoming its threats, needs, and aspirations.

2. For some reasons to search theosophical alternatives to the risk society

The desire to create and establish a society of order, tranquility, prosperity, peace, and cooperation has centuries-old roots both in the development of the state system of the world and in the intellectual thought and action of mankind, manifested in hundreds of pages left by the best minds both in the West and in the East, the North and in the South. But centuries of state history and the achievements of scientific thought from ancient times to the first decades of the 21st century did not create a society of peace, tranquility, order, and security. In the current era of globalization⁴, human civilization threatens itself with destruction, turning the consumer society of material well-being, egocentrism and influence into value. These are not values, but prerequisites and conditions for even greater alienation, aggression, lack of freedom, intolerance between people. The division at the international level is marked by the continuous improvement of weapons, regardless of climate problems, local wars, lack of resources, and global insecurity. From the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic is added. The contagion determines the lives of all nations and all humanity and is clear and indisputable proof that the leading dimension of world society in the early third decade of the 21st century is the risk.

United by the pandemic distribution of contagion of unknown origin, humanity is divided by fear and the need for isolation, the elimination of which poses a danger to life itself - individual, social, international. To the endangered animals and plants due to human activity and global climate change, man is added, without having a world war. This situation is a clear illustration of the definition that the German sociologist Ulrich Beck gives to the World Risk Society as a sum of direct and side effects and effects of human activity. This article adopts this definition – Risk Society, as a definition of modern civilization. By 2021, this civilization has failed to take advantage of the views, theses, and theories of its greatest minds from antiquity to the present day and to establish peace, tranquility, and prosperity on Earth. At the beginning of the

² Blavatsky entitled "Cosmogenesis" the first volume of "The Secret Doctrine" and so called the process of formation of cosmic bodies.

³ Anthropogenesis is the title of the second volume of The Secret Doctrine. The name summarizes the process of origin and evolution of man on Earth.

⁴ The definition given by Ulrich Beck in "What is globalization" is accepted, where it is said that "globalization is a process in which nation-states and their sovereignty are intertwined in the network of transnational actors and obey their power, their orientation and identity".

third millennium, physical freedom was replaced by mental freedom under the influence of the disintegration of values, and the replacement of human dignity with the price of profit and material well-being at any cost. The ideals of antiquity and the enlightenment of truth, goodness, and beauty seem to be forever abandoned and in their place is established man and world society, which easily turns its dignity into a bargaining chip, a commodity that is sold and bought for fame, money, career (Bogomilova, 2016).

The transformation of moral values into material ones in the conditions of market financial globalization inevitably raises the question of where the world is going and what will happen to humanity if we come to a total abandonment of moral categories, striving for spiritual growth and freedom. The search for answers to this question provides a basis for the study of unexplored areas of knowledge and an attempt to find in them opportunities to overcome the moral and spiritual crisis of globalized humanity.

3. What is Theosophy?

Theosophy is still poorly studied and considered non-science mainly because of the way knowledge is acquired through mystical experience. The name itself unites the meaning of the ancient Greek θεός – God and σοφία – wisdom or Divine wisdom. The different definitions fluctuate between the names “Religious Philosophy”, “Modern Movement Created in the USA in 1875 based on Buddhist and Brahmanical Theories”, “Doctrine of the Knowledge of God”. The hesitations also lead to interpretations of theosophy in a broad and narrow sense, and this division has been gradually overcome in recent years, without moving in the direction of a unified and generally accepted definition.

At the same time, the development of scientific knowledge in its diversity and totality in the first decades of the 21st century opens a new page – the page of those defined as Sofia disciplines, whose name comes again from the Greek Sophia – wisdom. They study the universe as a whole, as an interconnected and interdependent unity of knowledge and wisdom. In this, they differ from the “logical” sciences, whose name often ends with “logic” – again from the Greek logos/word, doctrine, essence, and which study a particular subject within its framework. With each science-Logia can be indicated discipline-Sofia. Thus Theosophy corresponds to Theology (Epshtein, 2019). This correspondence limits the subject of Theosophy but opens up possibilities for a full and detailed study and presentation of the various aspects of theosophical teaching. Such a study of the multifaceted nature of theosophy is lacking in Bulgaria, and globally only the beginning of the path to the study of issues and topics of theosophy is outlined, although in the last three decades there has been an increase in scientific interest in Helena Blavatsky and her works. Although difficult, the purely historical-biographical account of Blavatsky is overcome and the socio-philosophical doctrine outlined in *The Secret Doctrine*, *The Isis Revealed*, *The Key to Theosophy*, and hundreds of other pages in books are studied and analyzed.

There is still no complete scientific study of the question of duty according to Blavatsky's doctrine – a question that is directly related to the so-called Practical Theosophy (Olcott, 2002). This article marks the possible directions of research on the nature and social significance of theosophical duty, as this is done in a comparative analysis with questions about the risky nature of modern civilization.

Among the English-language works on philosophical aspects of the doctrine of Helena Blavatsky stands out the work of Tim Rudbeg and Julie Chajes. Tim Rudbøg explores Blavatsky in the light of Western esotericism, which, according to Uther Hanegraaf, originated in the spirit of Protestantism in the second half of the 17th century (Hanegraaf, 2010). Researchers of Western esotericism consider Helena Blavatsky mainly with a historical-biographical approach, which is also characteristic of Tim Rudbeg. He is at the forefront of a growing trend in the West and

America – to dismiss as false and defamatory the accusations made against Blavatsky in the late 19th century – plagiarism and fraud. In the spirit of the Saptaparna – 7 stage of development, which Blavatsky puts at the heart of every question she considers, Rudbeg identifies seven main themes in her writings. These are a/theosophy with a capital “T” as metaphysical divine wisdom; b/distinguishing theosophy from the occult; c/existing religions as a distortion of the truth; d/against the materialism of its modern science; e/creation of a universal brotherhood of mankind; f/new cosmological system; g/the spiritual development of mankind (Rudbøg, 2019).

Another researcher, Julie Chajes of the University of Haifa, Israel, maintains that the question of reincarnation is fundamental to Helena Blavatsky’s theosophical doctrine (Chajes, 2007). Rebirth is the universal law, according to which the periods of rest and activity of the Universe alternate, the “awakening” of the phenomenal world from the noumenal essence takes place, the planets and everything visible are formed – minerals, plants, animals, people. Reincarnation and in addition Karma determine human evolution, Chajes said.

In Russian-language scientific thought, Blavatsky’s work is fundamental to the emergence and spread of the doctrine of Living Ethics with its founders Helena and Nikolai Roerich. Helena Roerich repeatedly points out that “Our Teaching contains Blavatsky’s “Secret Doctrine” (International Center of the Roerichs, 2016). Some Russian scholars view Blavatsky and her writings as the first stage of Russian cosmism (Rifatovich, 2011), a religious-philosophical current based on a holistic worldview that presupposes a theologically sound evolution of the universe.

Although Helena Blavatsky is Russian, she writes her works in English. In her native Russia from the 19th century to the present, the name and books of Blavatsky still face mostly resistance and criticism, and less impartial and objective analysis (Soloviev, 1893).

The conclusions of this article find parallels with the monograph of the professors from the University of Altai Ivanov, Fotieva, Shishin with the title *The Rising Man: A Philosophical and Scientific Synthesis of Living Ethics* (Ivanov, Fotieva & Shishin, 2012). The study defends the thesis that the roots of the modern global crisis date back to the end of the 19th century, when: (1) Is the beginning of the modern destructive pseudo-globalization, connected not with the unification of the earthly civilization, but with the division of the world into a rich North and a poor South, into a civilized West and a retrograde East; (2) A new stage in the struggle between labor and big capital begins, which opens a universal mechanism for the exploitation not only of employees and colonial states but also of their small and medium-sized business colleagues; (3) Humanity is entering an era of global environmental crisis, the biosphere is beginning to lose its capacity for self-recovery; (4) The conflicts between the town and the village, between the physical and the spiritual, are aggravated; (5) European civilization is entering an era of global cultural and value crisis, defined by Nietzsche as “God is dead” and by Dostoevsky as “If God is dead, then everything is allowed”; (6) Both the classical democratic idea with the slogan “Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood” and the church-supported idea of a monarchical system sink into political non-existence so that liberal-democratic and authoritarian-socialist projects for social organization come to the surface (Ivanov et al., 2012). According to a study by philosophers at Altai University, “the main reason for the destructive stagnation of civilization in the 20th century was the lack of an adequate and comprehensive philosophical concept of man. At the heart of the crisis of civilization is above all the crisis of the European “image of man” and, accordingly, of the whole of European anthropology, both “classical” and “non-classical” (Ivanov et al., 2012). The monograph criticizes famous philosophers and schools in Europe in the 20th century and emphasizes that the way to form a comprehensive philosophical concept of man is the search for synthesis in scientific knowledge.

4. The Risk Society concept

The socio-philosophical concept of the Risk Society is associated mainly with the German sociologist Ulrich Beck and the last quarter of the 20th century. Other researchers – Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens, Mary Douglas, Brian Turner, work on the concept of Risk Society, without analyzing the full range of economic, social, political, and psychological aspects of this concept, its causes, and consequences. In English-language publications, Ulrich Beck is mentioned as a major figure in the science of the risk society and equates the Risk Society with the world reality in the first decades of the 21st century (Oxford Reference, last visited 2021). The Russian-language definitions discuss the broad and narrow meaning of the term Risk Society: in a broad it is seen as an integral concept, uniting views on the development of modern society in terms of its increased risk and the presence of global dangers; in a narrow sense, the concept is understood as a new form of modern industrial society, whose distinguishing feature is the risk (Wiki, last visited 2021).

As a concept with its own life, Risk Society was formulated by Ulrich Beck in his eponymous study published in 1986. But the roots of Risk Society are traced back in time, with Beck himself giving a clear picture of their germ in the essence of modern industrial society, which Beck calls the First Modernity in contrast to the Second Modernity – the time after the 60s of the 20th century, and even more clearly – after the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Beck, 2008). The second modernity, according to Beck, is characterized mainly by global risks and their invisible ubiquitous consequences; by destroying the main dividing lines and institutions of the First Modernity; abolition of national sovereignty; blurring of boundaries and asymmetry of classes; hidden threats and unlimited violence, as the Cold War has been replaced by terrorism; protection of human rights; humanitarian interventions; national neoliberalism with a renunciation of solidarity and neo-nationalism.

About himself, his reasons and motives for working on the concept of human civilization as a community of risk, Ulrich Beck says in his “Cosmopolitan Manifesto” (a kind of program article, titled entirely allusively similar to the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels): “I call myself not an optimist nor a pessimist, but a pessimistic optimist: the global risk society is the opposite of the so-called the “postmodern constellation”; it is a self-critical, highly political society in a new sense: the transnational dialogue between politics and democracy (and probably even sociology) needs to be rediscovered” (Beck, 2001: 17-18). Very rarely, Beck allows himself to give fixed guidelines on what to do in politics, although he analyzes the globalized world. One such concretization is made in “What is globalization”, where the sociologist reveals his vision that regardless of the socio-moral problems of civilization, “the foundations of a world republic are being prepared, at the center of which is the freedom of the individual” (Beck, 2008). It can be assumed that this utopia (from the standpoint of the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, such a vision seems utopian) outlines the future result of the ubiquitous change at all levels of society, which he formulated as reflexive modernization.

A Risk Society, according to Ulrich Beck, is a society of ubiquitous, multifaceted, and largely invisible risks and their consequences. Created by the civilization of the 20th century, these risks have become an integral part of life and even they are life itself, filled with total uncertainty and side effects. The deep all-encompassing essence of the Risk Society is the reflection, its ontologization as being, attitude, action, and behavior, a reflection of the individual, the family, and the society as a whole. Hence the concept of Reflexive Modernization, which Beck justifies as typical of the Second Modernity: “The concept combines the reflex of self-threatening modernization with the reflection on this (self) threat, in which new conflicts and tensions between interests arise and divide society” (Beck, 2001).

Individualization is characteristic of society at universal risk. This concept is directly related to Reflexive Modernization and refers to “the formation of individuals who claim to be

authors of their own lives, creators of their own identities” (Beck, 2008: 18). And this, Beck argues, is not selfishness: “While in the old system of values the ego is always forced to obey the patterns of collective life, the new orientations to “we” give rise to something of a cooperative or altruistic individualism. Thinking of oneself and living for others - once considered by definition to be opposite principles – are now revealed as internally and substantively interconnected principles. To live alone means to live socially” (Beck, 2008: 21).

5. About theosophical duty and alternatives

The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 by Elena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, is a clear call for action for global political change, especially as regards the organization’s first goal. The three main goals of the Theosophical Society are: (1) To form the core of the Universal Brotherhood of Mankind, without distinguishing race, religion, sex, class, or color; (2) To support the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science; (3) To study the unexplained laws of nature and the hidden abilities of humanity. The second and third objectives are more “humanitarian” in nature because of their focus on research and education. But the work for their implementation is fundamental about the structure and development of world civilization. Hence the definite connection of these goals with the first and with politics as a guiding principle in modern society.

However, this linking the goals of the Theosophical Society with politics contradicts the statutes of the Society itself and raises the question of whether it is possible to have a theosophical alternative to politics. Theosophists are forbidden to participate in politics as representatives of the organization. They are free to do so only in their capacity as private individuals. Blavatsky explains this paradox with the following reasons: “Trying to achieve political reform until changes in human nature occur is like pouring new wine into old skins” (Blavatsky, 2006). Blavatsky repeatedly emphasizes that all social changes begin first with a change in personal consciousness, then change public consciousness and achieve positive changes in the life of society: “Make people feel and recognize in the depths of their hearts what their a real duty to all people and any abuse of power, any unjust law in national politics based on human, social and political selfishness, will disappear by itself. Stupid is the gardener who hopes to remove poisonous plants just by cutting them instead of uprooting them. As long as there is selfishness among the people, there will be no real and useful political reform for all” (Blavatsky, 2006). Henry Olcott notes in *Practical Theosophy*: “According to the statutes of the Theosophical Society, its members are strictly forbidden to engage in politics. But as individuals, they have the right to be actively involved and often do” (Olcott, 2002). In this regard, Blavatsky notes that the individual activities and participation of the individual theosophist in politics must not conflict with the goals and objectives of the Theosophical Society, and must not harm that society (Blavatsky, 2006).

Ulrich Beck emphasizes that in a risky society, politics is deprived of its place as an organization and implementation of governance, as “interventionist power of the state” (Beck, 2013). This seemingly paradoxical conclusion is explained by the dominance of market relations, in which economic development and freedom of science become a leading factor in the formation of state policies. Beck formulates the thesis of “a profound systemic change of the political, and in a double sense: on the one hand (a) the centralized political system loses its power in the course of the establishment and perception of civil rights in the forms of a new political culture; on the other hand (b) the transition from politics to sub-politics⁵ brings about socio-structural changes: it is a process of development in which the current “peace formula” – technical progress equals social progress - seems to have lost its application. Both perspectives are integrated into the overall

⁵ Ulrich Beck connects “technical and economic development” and science with the concept of “sub politics” (Beck, 2013: 327-328).

diagnosis of “dropping policy boundaries” (Beck, 2013). This observation leads the German sociologist to the conclusion that in the conditions of a risky society “risks become the engine of the self-politicization of modernity” and with them “the concept, place, and mediators of politics change” (Beck, 2013: 322-323).

How does this conclusion relate to the possible theosophical alternative, since the Theosophical Society categorically distances itself from politics but does not prohibit its members as individuals from actively participating in it? The answer to this question is related to the individual duty of each theosophist and his actions to fulfill the duty. The thesis is that in fulfilling their duty, the individual theosophist and the Theosophical Society as a whole carry out a precisely political activity with long-term effect – with their educational and social functions lay a solid foundation for a future world society built on the principles of brotherhood, unity, cooperation, love, and mercy. These are universal human ideals, which in different epochs have been “attached” to one or another ideology and still have a utopian character. This does not diminish their importance as a quest to build a more perfect society. On the contrary, the duty of the Theosophist to act actively for their practical realization makes Theosophical Society one of the “mediators of politics” of which Ulrich Beck speaks.

In *The Key to Theosophy* Helena Blavatsky outlines a long list of tasks that members of the Theosophical Society must perform, following their duty as theosophists. These tasks are most often not directly fixed and are named by Blavatsky. Like her style in *The Secret Doctrine*, here too the multifaceted duty of the Theosophist is most often veiled in verbosity and only in places is directly named. Blavatsky points out that self-sacrifice, compassion, love of neighbor, and humanity are leading for every member of the Theosophical Society. But to be most useful, the theosophist must first work on himself and be an example by his actions and way of life.

In Blavatsky’s “list” of requirements for the duty of each theosophist are the following tasks: To subordinate his lower self to his higher self; To purify oneself internally and morally; Do not be afraid of anyone or anything except the court of your own conscience; To do things to the end, unless he thinks something is stupid and not worth it; To achieve first happiness for others and then for oneself, as “happiness” means satisfaction from the performed duty; To affirm the truth; To fulfill his duty first to the closest ones - parents, spouses, children; To show others what a person's duty to all people is; To fulfill its duty to humanity and above all to the poor; To endure his life with humility and gratitude; To act, not just talk; To affirm justice, kindness, mercy; If he is involved in politics, he can do so only as a private person, following the ideas and goals of the Theosophical Society; To work to create and promote a sense of duty in those who can improve the lives of the poor; To be an example and a center for spiritual life and development; To cooperate with every action for the development of humanity; Let his self-sacrifice be without self-denial and without fanaticism; To return part of his property if it is not useful to anyone, but only to his selfishness; To act individually, not en masse, when showing mercy, without intermediaries; Always forgive; Not to cause harm to any living being; Not to lead an empty and useless life; To work to fulfill the goals of the Theosophical Society, without transferring his work to others; To be humble and to admit one's own mistakes; To forget one's own personality (Blavatsky, 2006).

This is too long and too strict against the background of risky modernity “rules” for the action of each member of the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky herself admits that the requirements are not small and not easy, but are a guarantee for a conscious change of personality and environment, and thus gradually of society as a whole: “Requirements express the ideal of our organization, but we are forced to leave their practical fulfillment of the judgment of the members themselves. Unfortunately, the state of the human mind in our age is such that if we do not leave these rules optional, no one will dare to join the Theosophical Society” (Blavatsky, 2006).

6. Conclusion

Regardless of the utopian from today's point of view nature of the theosophical understanding of duty, it offers a basis on which to build models of behavior and organizations aimed at improving the lives of the individual in a risky society. The world, with all its risky situations and challenges, may begin to change for more order, kindness, empathy, and, in the future, for world brotherhood and unity. This is the main suggestion that Blavatsky makes most clearly in her latest work, *The Key to Theosophy*. The hypothetical nature of this suggestion is evolutionary, not revolutionary in terms of consciousness, action, behavior in life. In essence, theosophy is an evolutionary theory that relies on a gradual but sure and definite change – individual and social, in an upward direction by perfecting the unity of spirit and matter. Helena Blavatsky's theosophical doctrine affirms that the world is knowable in its diversity and unity and that knowledge has no limits. This epistemological optimism is an important prerequisite for overcoming pessimism and denial of the world, society, and man in the troubled current world reality.

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