

Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ESOTERICISM

FROM THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

Edited by
Olli Pitkänen



Philosophical Perspectives on Esotericism

This volume offers the first systematic philosophical study of esotericism and late modern philosophy. It addresses fundamental philosophical questions related to esotericism and reveals that esoteric ideas have had decisive impact on countless important philosophers, even if this fact has been neglected in contemporary philosophy.

The first part of the book is dedicated to substantial and methodological questions. What is philosophy, what is esotericism, and how should we think about their relationship? The second section is more historically oriented, and it is divided in two parts. Part I is concerned with German romanticism and idealism, with a specific focus on the influence of esotericism on Hegel and Schelling, as well as the connection between romanticism and Kabbalah in the work of Gershom Scholem. Part II explores esotericism in phenomenology, pragmatism, and post-idealism, specifically in the work of William James, Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson, and Roy Bhaskar.

Philosophical Perspectives on Esotericism will appeal to scholars and advanced students working in philosophy of religion, history of philosophy, and religious studies.

Olli Pitkänen is a postdoctoral researcher (Academy of Finland, “Esoteric Thought in Philosophy from the 19th Century to the Present” 2022–2025) at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He has authored several articles on German idealism, evil, and esotericism.

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Preface

Few themes are as societally influential and individually meaningful to many while at the same time as completely ignored in the academic world, especially from the philosophical perspective, as esotericism. If the reader is not familiar with the term “esotericism”, I am talking here about phenomena such as occultism, witchcraft, secret societies, and “alternative sciences”. Whatever one thinks of these phenomena, studies in recent decades show a consistent widespread interest and commitment to such beliefs in Western societies. Mental instability or lack of education do not play any role in explaining such beliefs.

Though my career in the academy has not been as a scholar of esotericism, the esoteric was an important part of my life long before I started my university studies. Similarly to the concept of esotericism and many esoteric teachings, its impact on my life has been complicated. I spent my youth as what one could call an angry young nihilist who was always more or less interested in the paranormal. I had also already heard about Carl Jung’s ideas, which resonated with me to some extent. It was around my 18th year when I heard about Helena Blavatsky’s theosophy, and somehow it made a total impact on me almost instantly: one could actually find meaning in life that is different from the feeble humanism and petty bourgeois life of contemporary society – a sentiment that I felt quite strongly back then. For a short while, I took most of even the wildest and often contradictory ideas of Blavatsky as authoritative. What followed next was a long but steady realisation that despite some profound insights that one rarely finds in “mainstream” science, philosophy, or religion, it is not intellectually honest to adopt this kind of “alternative truth” hook, line, and sinker.

The most important turning point in my life was when I began my university studies and changed the major subject from mathematics to philosophy after three years of study. I was totally disheartened because I expected to find at least something similar to the ideas that were familiar

to me from theosophy (and to a lesser extent, other occult schools as well), but there seemed to be absolutely nothing like that within the philosophical community. If anything, the openly theosophical ideas I took up in my Bachelor's Thesis were ridiculed by my peers. Though the experience was frustrating, to say the least, I somehow realised already then that my peers had also pointed out something important that I should make clearer to myself if I was going to conduct proper philosophical research. I left esotericism completely out of my Master's thesis and went for a "legitimate" philosophical topic: the idea of evil in the philosophies of Kant and Schelling. Learning how to philosophise, in the academic sense, had gradually led me to take more distance from esotericism in my personal life as well.

However, some aspects of esoteric thought have always remained at least in the background of my being. Having enough distance from my former "denominational" esotericism (also in the sense of avoiding overaggressive critical reactions) and confidence as a philosopher, I finally decided to start a philosophical research project on esotericism even though I was warned that this might be academic suicide. On the contrary, I have received excessive funding, and the atmosphere in the academic world towards studying the esoteric has changed a lot in 20 years. The topic is obviously still controversial, but, actually, I would be really worried if it was not. I regard this volume as the main work in my current research project, and hopefully it will become a beginning of a new metaphilosophical field that could be called "philosophy of esotericism".

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Many thanks to the staff at the world’s leading unit in the study of esotericism, The Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP) at the University of Amsterdam, where I spent the first half of the year 2024 on a research stay, mostly working on this volume. Specific thanks to Marco Pasi and Wouter Hanegraaff for their valuable comments in various phases of my research project.

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Editor's Introduction

Olli Pitkänen

Defining Esotericism

In academic philosophy, the word “esoteric” usually appears as a pejorative characterisation that is roughly synonymous with “unclear”. Traditionally this has been the case in the academic world in general as well, but this has been changing since the field known as the study of esotericism was established. Academic study of esotericism is a multidisciplinary field of research which established its name and started really to flourish through the pioneering work of Antoine Faivre during the early 1990s at Sorbonne University in France. However, even before the concept “study of esotericism” was born, important studies on the topic already existed. One could mention, for example, the works of Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, Martin Buber, and Carl Gustav Jung. Frances Yates’s *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979), and *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972) have been particularly well received by contemporary scholars of esotericism.

Faivre’s roots were in literary studies, but the emerging field soon attracted scholars from different disciplines, such as history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies, and, perhaps most obviously, religious studies. Even in such a small country as Finland, today there are dozens of scholars from various disciplines who are a part of the global network of the study of esotericism, even though not all of them identify as “scholars of esotericism”.

It appears paradoxical to me, a philosopher who was interested in esotericism long before starting my philosophy studies, that the representation of philosophers in the study of esotericism is virtually non-existent. After all, at least some forms of esotericism could be called philosophies in the broad sense of the term. The philosophical community has not reacted in almost any way to this new emerging and already established academic field, even though esotericism is obviously tied to countless crucial

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philosophical questions, in terms of both the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophical issues.

There are, however, some scholars of esotericism with an eye to take up philosophically interesting issues (Egil Asprem is one obvious example), and there are also some philosophers who have recognised and analysed esoteric influences in the thought of various well-known philosophers.¹ To my knowledge, this is still the first volume to be published that takes up the relationship between esotericism and philosophy as its central theme at a general level. For such a volume, it is best to begin with some definitions of esotericism, even if the scope may be here emphasised to the detriment of precision, and different authors in this volume understand esotericism in highly diverse ways.

Although the meaning of philosophy is not called into question as often, there is actually no general consensus as to the meaning of the term. This becomes evident in the variety of different ideals of *good* philosophy. For example, while it is often emphasised today that the conflict between analytical and continental philosophy belongs to the past, many of the same questions that were an issue in the first half of the 20th century have not disappeared by any means, and institutional divisions usually still follow the old dividing lines, even if outspoken conflicts are no longer that common. Especially when the meaning of philosophy is extended beyond academic practice, it becomes evident that there is no clear-cut boundary between philosophy and various other subjects, such as science, art, religion, and politics.

In the context of discussing esotericism and philosophy, the closest relevant categories to philosophy are probably science and religion. While philosophy itself is a science in the academic sense, philosophy can be distinguished from other sciences by the fact that it concerns questions that are not solvable by empirical research.² Philosophy's basic difference from religion is equally clear: in philosophy, it is not legitimate to rely on faith. Even if faith can be a source for the foundational presuppositions of philosophical argumentation, in order to be philosophical, the argumentation itself must be logical and it must not rely on dogmas, on the one hand, or subjective religious experiences, on the other.

One reason why esotericism should be an interesting category for philosophers is that it defies these traditional distinctions, which are usually seen as quite clear. Antoine Faivre's pioneering definition of esotericism is illuminating precisely in this respect, even if it is no longer popular in the study of esotericism. Faivre defines esotericism as a "form of thought" that resembles science, philosophy, religion, or art, depending on what kind of perspective and data are adopted, but it cannot be reduced to any combination of these categories. Faivre (1994, 10–15) defines the most central aspects of this form of thought in terms of six different characteristics,

the first four of which are understood as necessary and the last two only common in characterising thought as esoteric: (1) correspondences (systematic “extra-causal” connections between things belonging to different orders, such as metals, plants, and parts of the human body), (2) living nature (the whole of nature understood as a conscious, willing organism), (3) imagination and mediations (direct intuitive understanding in contrast to discursive reason, particularly understood as mediating the body and the mind, or the spiritual and the material), and (4) the experience of transmutation (the experience of transforming into a completely new kind of being, often divided into three phases, namely, purgation, illumination, and unification). The merely common traits include: (5) concordance (the presupposition of a common truth behind different religious traditions) and (6) transmission (a continuous line of masters and disciples).

In the study of esotericism, it has been uniformly acknowledged as Faivre's merit that he defined esotericism as an object of scientific study. The fifth characteristic in Faivre's definition, a common hidden truth behind different religious doctrines, had often been taken simply as an assumption, for example, in early religious studies esotericism (Eliade, Jung, etc.) that preceded contemporary study of esotericism. Faivre himself had earlier made the same “perennialist” assumption as well.³ The definition and approach presented in his *Access to Western Esotericism* marked a culmination of the distinction between Faivre the esotericist and Faivre the scholar of esotericism.⁴ At the same time, it presented “esotericism” as a new, previously neglected subject for scientific approaches.

However, Faivre's definition of esotericism soon came under attack, and after a while it came to be frequently discussed as a famous example of how *not* to define esotericism. The second famous definition comes from Kocku von Stuckrad, who adopted in many ways a completely opposite approach to Faivre's. As the title of his seminal work *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* already suggests, von Stuckrad understands esotericism as claims to “secret knowledge”. Instead of “esotericism”, von Stuckrad (2005, 5) prefers to talk about “esoteric discourses”. According to von Stuckrad, Faivre's definition is an ideal type definition; it rather expresses what *should* be, according to Faivre, understood as esotericism than offers a purely historical analysis of certain phenomena. In von Stuckrad's (2005, 10) view, “definitions are tools of *interpretation*; they should not be used essentially”; from this basis, he understands the esoteric as “*claims* to ‘real’ or absolute knowledge and the *means* of making this knowledge available”.⁵

The third and probably most influential definition of esotericism comes from Wouter Hanegraaff, who was also for several years the director of the world's leading unit in the study of esotericism, The Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents in the University of

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Amsterdam (HHP).⁶ Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* is probably the most widely read and influential single work in the field. For Hanegraaff, esotericism is "a conceptual waste-basket for 'rejected knowledge', which has kept functioning as the academy's radical 'Other' to the present day" (Hanegraaff 2013, 221). Hanegraaff understands esotericism as those ideas and practices that became actively marginalised, "othered", in relation to post-Enlightenment rationality (Hanegraaff 2013, 254).

However, according to Hanegraaff, the historical background of what became rejected as esotericism in the Enlightenment is found in the early modern polemics on "paganism", particularly in the work of Jacob Thomasius (1622–1684). The main theological problem with "paganism" was that it was based on the idea of the eternity of the world that was in conflict with the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. According to Thomasius, this heresy was accompanied with another heretic idea: that the human being can gain "supra-rational" knowledge about his divine origin (gnosis). (Hanegraaff 2013, 369–372). It was these two "grand heresies" that formed the basis of linking together traditions, such as Theosophy, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism for the first time.

Simplifying Hanegraaff's complex treatment of the subject, the rejected status of these ideas was slowly transformed from heresy into "humbug" and "superstition" during the Enlightenment. Ideas that were originally rejected as defying the core teachings of (Protestant) Christianity for the first time came to be related together as what is now called "esotericism" and rejected as "irrational". Consequently, even if science and religion are conceived of as opposites in common discussion, they actually share many points of common ground, while esotericism can be seen as that which is "other" to both of these mainstream Western categories.

One more approach to be mentioned is Michael Bergunder's idea of esotericism as an "empty signifier" (following Ernest Laclau's conception). If von Stuckrad's definition is minimalist and partly motivated by avoiding Faivre's alleged essentialism, the same applies to Bergunder in another sense. According to Bergunder, "esotericism is to be understood as an identifying general term in the form of an empty signifier which, through a discourse community and in different fields of discourse, is articulated and reproduced" (Bergunder 2010, 31–32). To put it simply, Bergunder does not actually even try to define esotericism but rather seeks to make sense theoretically of how people talking about esotericism from very different viewpoints nevertheless refer to the same thing in some minimal sense. According to Bergunder, understanding esotericism as an empty signifier links together very heterogenous discourses of, for example, academic scholars, media, esotericists themselves, or dedicated anti-esotericists. It also makes intelligible how esotericists "may position themselves at the

same time as philosophers, atheists, humanists, Christians, Jews, Hindus, etc.” without referring to some kind of common denominator behind these completely different identities (Bergunder 2010, 20).

Dimitry Okropiridze has recently summed up and commented on the definition debate in the study of esotericism that has lasted for three decades. His conclusion is rather straightforward, that basically a lasting hegemonic definition of such a multifaceted conception as esotericism is not possible or desirable, and that different perspectives are needed. Okropiridze (2021, 225) distinguishes between two opposite “vectors” when approaching esotericism: ontological and epistemological. According to Okropiridze, a clear example of the dominance of ontology is Faivre’s definition, which basically assumes that esotericism is a thing “out there”, and the researcher’s task is to describe it in the most accurate way. The most extreme example of epistemological emphasis is Bergunder’s approach, in which the meaning of esotericism is entirely a matter of historically contingent, infinitely complex relations of power and identity formation.

In opposition to Egil Asprem, who has proposed a synthesising “building block model” in understanding esotericism, Okropiridze (2021, 228) argues that no synthesis is possible: both of the two approaches alone lead to contradictions, but there is no unifying position that would retain their respective strengths. The conclusion, then, is that the study of esotericism has to keep the discussion of its object alive all the time, and the best definition depends on what specific phenomenon is studied and from what kind of perspective. As Okropiridze points out, this is not actually a specific characteristic of esotericism but applies to any equally general and heterogenous category, such as “science” or “religion”. When it comes to the relatively unexplored area of philosophy and esotericism, I will suggest a perspective that has not been popular in the contemporary study of esotericism.

Even though they are highly diverse, the viewpoints in the study of esotericism are most often based on methodologies in various humanistic disciplines. In philosophy, there is the peculiar characteristic that it is concerned with the kind of “truth-questions” that are largely excluded from humanistic studies. Philosophy can and should assess the *truth* of at least some of the widespread esoteric claims. Although there need not be any antagonism, philosophical perspectives on esotericism are somewhat different from strictly empirical humanist approaches, which have dominated the academic study of esotericism.

The last note to be made before proceeding is that there is yet another sense of esotericism, which has only a tangential connection with what has been discussed so far. Following the original Greek meanings of *eso* and *exo*, esoteric and exoteric can be understood simply as inner and outer, respectively. In this sense, esoteric is simply something that has

been purposefully concealed from a wider audience or something that relates to emphasised interiority. In their article “Nietzsche, the History of Philosophy, and Esotericism”, Laurence and Lawrence Lampert appear to take up the same theme as this volume: esotericism as “a great and neglected theme in the history of philosophy” (Lampert & Lampert 1995, 36). However, the Lamperts discuss esotericism only in the sense explained above, as purposefully concealed information and knowledge. Leo Strauss appears as a central thinker when esotericism is understood in this mainly political sense. The Lamperts apologise that “esotericism seems *intellectually* suspicious because of its historic association with occult teachings” (Lampert & Lampert 1995, 37). However, as is probably clear to the reader at this point, the very agenda of the study of esotericism has been to question the prevalent idea that “occult teachings” are something that can be simply sidestepped in academic study because they consist of mere “humbug”. Alongside with occult teachings, mysticism in particular is something that this volume takes as its focus in relationship to philosophy.

Esotericism and Mysticism

From this short introduction to the relatively short history of the study of esotericism, we can proceed to a specific esoteric conception that is particularly interesting in approaching the intersection of esotericism and philosophy: *gnosis*. Gnosis can be translated literally as “knowledge”, but its meaning is quite different to how knowledge is generally understood today. Hanegraaff distinguishes three different epistemological categories in modern Western thought: reason, faith, and gnosis (Hanegraaff 2018, 89). Reason is associated with science, and it requires that truths are communicable by discursive language and verifiable by either scientific practice or logical argumentation. Faith is the “orthodox” model in monotheistic Western religions; it is still communicable, like reason, but no longer verifiable. Gnosis, on the contrary, is neither verifiable nor communicable; it is immediate, like perception, but also in some sense intellectual. If reason is associated with science and faith with religion, gnosis is the main epistemological category associated with esotericism.

At this point, the difference of mysticism and esotericism should be addressed. In the introduction to the *Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, Glenn Alexander Magee argues that esotericism is based on mysticism in the sense that mystical gnosis is at least a tacit presupposition in esotericism.⁷ I agree with Magee (2016, xiii) that it is not appropriate to make a sharp distinction between esotericism and mysticism. For example, the important figure in the history of German philosophy, Jacob Boehme, can be equally called a philosopher, a mystic, or an esotericist, depending on what aspects of his thought are discussed,

and from which perspective. However, especially when it comes to philosophical perspectives, some “gradual” distinctions are very useful.

Three distinguishing criteria can be found in Magee’s introduction. Mysticism is most often (though not always) associated with a more deeply personal, concealed side of different “orthodox” religions. Esotericism, on the contrary, is not so closely related with religion as classically understood (think, for example, of contemporary Tarot or astrology). Second, while mysticism is most characteristically concentrated on the mystical experience or gnosis itself, esotericism consists more of practices that ultimately build on gnosis and assume it as their basis. Magic, for example, is more associated with esotericism than with mysticism. A term closely associated with esotericism, “occult sciences”, can illuminate the distinction. Mysticism is gnosis, and esotericism is the “science” based on it. In Magee’s words: “Mysticism is *gnosis*; esotericism is *technē* (technique or art) ... this *technē* is founded on *gnosis*” (2016, xxx).

Third, according to Magee (2016, xxxi–xxxii), mysticism is directed towards accepting reality as it is, to attaining some kind of fuller and more satisfying experience of it, while esotericism is more associated with actively changing reality. Magee’s point can be illustrated by pointing out how esotericists often claim that magic, alchemy, and other esoteric practices can have more fundamental transformative power – on both individual and collective levels – than “mainstream” science or, for example, political institutions. Mystics do not as often make such claims about their meditations.

When it comes to philosophy, there is also an important difference between receptions of mysticism and esotericism. Unlike esotericism, mysticism is generally recognised as a major phenomenon in the history of philosophy. Even Heidegger and Wittgenstein, among the most important philosophers of the 20th century, have both been interpreted as mystics. The term “esotericism”, on the contrary, rarely appears in academic philosophy apart from the trivial meaning of unclarity and “humbug”. In what follows, I will argue for the need to recognise esotericism in a certain important sense as distinct from mysticism, and the relevance – even necessity – of the philosophical study of esotericism.

There are three possible ways to think about the relationship of philosophy and mysticism. If a “mystical interpretation” of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is accepted, as I argue it should be to some extent, there are three possible reactions. One can follow the spirit of Kant’s transcendental philosophy and make a sharp distinction between philosophical argumentation and mystical gnosis. This leaves the possibility of “legitimate” mysticism *outside philosophy*. It was Kant’s motto to limit the area of reason to make room for faith. It can be argued that Wittgenstein and Heidegger offer two different methodologies to modify and radicalise this basic idea.

Second, one can launch a philosophical attack against the possibility of mystical gnosis. For example, Quentin Meillassoux opposes the tradition of transcendental philosophy in general, which he calls “correlationism”, mainly on the basis that it legitimises mysticism on the condition that it takes place beyond the field of rational philosophy. According to Meillassoux, transcendental philosophy enables and even necessitates that religious “discourses continue to be meaningful – in a mythological or mystical register – even though they are scientifically and logically meaningless” (Meillassoux 2013, 41). Consistent with this intention, Meillassoux argues that we can know more than the transcendental, or the “correlationist”, tradition allows; there is an access to “things themselves” and it is rational all the way through. In this way, he attempts to erase the need for mystical gnosis, or even argues for its impossibility.

The third option, which I advocate for, is to argue that there is no absolutely sharp distinction between philosophy and mysticism to begin with. In many cases, the difference is clear enough; for example, Kant is a philosopher and Emanuel Swedenborg is a mystic or esotericist. But even then, a lot remains to be explored. A philosopher can have crucial influences from mystical sources, even if he or she transforms these ideas into “purely” philosophical arguments. A philosopher can also have mystical tendencies and interests which cannot be detected straightforwardly in his or her writings but which nevertheless operate as important background factors. Kant’s philosophy is apparently as rationalistic as it gets, but his Pietist background (with its mystical characteristics) can be detected in the spirit of his moral philosophy. It has also been argued that Kant remained fascinated by Swedenborg’s mysticism but kept very silent about it. In the current volume, Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm discusses this kind of case in relation to Roy Bhaskar’s affinity with the Theosophical Society.

However, the most interesting cases are those in which it is more or less unclear if a thinker traditionally conceived of as part of the mainstream history of philosophy is actually more of a philosopher or a mystic. Later I will discuss two instances of this in a bit more detail. But the very possibility of such thinkers brings us back to the specific category of esotericism. Continuing from Magee’s demarcation between esotericism and mysticism, one further idea could be added that relates specifically to philosophy. As discussed above, it is in principle quite simple to distinguish philosophy and mysticism. Philosophy starts with clearly articulated presuppositions (or even the claim that no presuppositions are needed!), proceeds with logical argumentation, and has discursively expressed claims as its result. Mysticism, on the contrary, has inarticulable gnosis as its aim or starting point, and it paradoxically attempts to express that which cannot be expressed. This is, of course, already a gross simplification, keeping in mind, for example, the relative “obscurity” of much of

classical continental philosophy. Through this simplification, however, it is easier to express my central argument.⁸

On paper, it is easy to keep philosophy and mysticism separate. The philosopher can adopt a friendly, neutral, or hostile attitude towards mysticism, but in all these cases he or she can let mysticism be what it is – outside the boundaries of philosophy. With esotericism, this is much more difficult. “Pure” mysticism (again, for a large part, my construct established for the sake of an argument) is deeply personal, it speaks with metaphors rather than direct arguments, and it seeks some kind of consolidation with the cosmos rather than radical societal change. Esotericism, on the contrary, is more theory-laden than mysticism. Unlike silent mysticism, it often attacks the scientific consensus. It is also more often tied to political programs. In short, esotericism is not so much completely other to philosophy as closer to “bad philosophy”. Esotericism looks like philosophy or science but does not fulfil the standards generally associated with these categories. The category of “occult sciences” – or, more lately, “pseudo-science” – is telling, being much more closely associated with esotericism than mysticism. Mysticism does not rival philosophy and even less science; it can be more easily sidestepped as “harmless speculation”. Esotericism, on the contrary, often “intrudes” into the areas that sciences and philosophy have declared as their own.

As discussed above, a philosopher can have mystical intentions without any direct visible consequences to his or her philosophy in terms of the general standards of philosophical text. When a philosopher has significant esoteric influences, it tends one way or another to transform the thought into what is conceived of as unconventional in the philosophical community. Sometimes it might actually be simply bad philosophy. In other cases, however, ideas that clearly come from esoteric sources, such as the theosophical or alchemical tradition, continue to have a positive transformative impact within philosophy up to this day. It is too easy a solution to argue that what once was conceived of as esoteric has later become a part of legitimate science or philosophy. This kind of argument implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) performs the naïve popular Enlightenment presumption that whatever has “reasonable” potential makes its way to the ever-growing body of science-philosophy, and all the rest is thrown into the esoteric waste basket of ideas, to use Hanegraaff’s apt expression. Such a simplistic argument has in fact more to do with religious thought than scientific study of the history of ideas. On the other hand, a philosopher has to be cautious of an opposite, equally dubious idea often addressed by esotericists: the claim that pieces of esoteric “perennial knowledge” have found their way into “profane” science. From this basis, we can now return to the various definitions of esotericism, and to the question how esotericism should be approached from a philosophical perspective.

Introducing Esotericism to Philosophical Research

Based on what has been assessed so far, it is time to address the main question of this volume: why should philosophers be interested in esotericism and the study of esotericism in particular? In an earlier article, I offered three different answers to this question: (1) there are lots of important esoteric influences in the history of philosophy whose esoteric origin is not often recognised, and when it is, it is downplayed, (2) the dividing line between philosophy and esotericism is not sharper today than it has been in the past, and there could still be a lot of potential in esoteric ideas for contemporary philosophy, and (3) many claims of esotericists also need to be approached very critically; philosophy gives a lot of critical tools, but such a critique requires some actual acquaintance with esotericism (Pitkänen 2023). Within this volume, several more specific arguments can be found related to all these three viewpoints.

Esotericism as a Form of Thought

Even though Faivre's definition of esotericism has not been very popular lately in the study of esotericism, I argue that it is still quite useful when discussing esotericism and philosophy. The purpose in that case is not to find the most exact definition of esotericism but to illustrate what esotericism is to a field in which it is relatively unknown. No one denies that Faivre's criteria for esoteric thought match Renaissance hermeticism and its related currents quite well. Though being critical of Faivre's approach in many respects, Hanegraaff even argues that "the conclusion will perhaps be surprising to some readers, but all of this means that Faivre's 'Western esotericism' is perfectly equivalent to what I have referred to as the Enlightenment's reservoir of 'rejected knowledge'" (Hanegraaff 2015, 79). In particular, even if there are many quite different forms of esotericism, the ideas emphasised by Faivre are precisely those that have most often influenced various philosophical movements, German idealism, and Romanticism in particular. Yet, very few philosophers are aware of the exact origin of these "wild" ideas within different philosophical traditions, let alone how they have developed in less obvious forms in more "sober" philosophical schools, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism, phenomenology, and poststructuralism.

Sean McGrath (2012, 22) correctly notes that the second of Faivre's characteristics of esotericism, living nature, is particularly central and in a way grounds all the other characteristics, such as correspondences or the idea of transmutation. Living nature is the "other" of Cartesian dualism and Newton's mechanistic physics, which have dominated the "deep structure" of philosophical discourse since early modernity. Yet, this other has

been constantly present in the philosophical community and sometimes it has even gotten the upper hand, such as in German idealism. Today, for example, panpsychism is an obvious descendant of these esoteric currents, and the controversy around it could be greatly illuminated by bringing its esoteric roots to light.

However, the most important aspect in Faivre's definition from the philosophical perspective is his idea of esotericism as a "form of thought". Regardless of one's philosophical commitments, concepts determine to a large extent how something is recognised as something. If esotericism does not exist for the philosophical community as anything but a pre-reflective pejorative expression, then that which is referred to as esotericism is not properly recognised either. Again, I do not claim that there is an essence of esotericism. Esotericism is not a solid actual thought tradition in the same way as, for instance, Marxism or psychoanalysis (even though it has influenced both significantly). However, there are practices that are associated with the occult and mystical, and which do not fit well into the established categories of science, philosophy, art, and politics. Bringing the category of esotericism to light, roughly in the way described by Faivre, makes obscure phenomena – a whole unrecognised form of thought – recognisable, and thereby enables systematic philosophical discussion about esotericism.

There have been decades, if not hundreds of years, of metaphilosophical discussion about philosophy's relationship to religion, science, politics, and art. In each case, it is recognised that the categories in question are fluid, and that there are various types of intersections. There is much less discussion about philosophy and mysticism (see Antti Piilola's chapter for an overview about philosophy of mysticism). One reason for this might be that, without the "mediating" category of esotericism it is not easy to find much common ground for discussion. Obviously, I do not mean that esotericism could potentially offer a "neutral" synthesis of philosophical and mystical thought – something that many esotericists would no doubt like to argue. However, studying esotericism philosophically could provide some new ways to approach the basic schism between mystical and philosophical thought, that is, the contrast between rational argumentation and claims of non-discursive understanding.

The Esoteric as an Element of Discourse

Von Stuckrad's entirely different definition of esotericism can be used for various purposes when discussing philosophy and esotericism. Unlike Faivre's definition, Von Stuckrad's approach to the esoteric as a structural element of discourse does not give many tools to analyse "esoteric content" within the philosophical tradition. However, an interesting aspect

about the relationship of philosophy and esotericism in general can be found when approached in light of von Stuckrad's analysis. The obvious strength of von Stuckrad's definition is that in its minimalism it can also be applied to distant periods of time and different cultures. Given how much categories such as science and philosophy have changed even from the Enlightenment, it quickly becomes very difficult to discuss the relationship of philosophy and esotericism in a meaningful way when moving further away from our present age.

Despite these difficulties, an opposition between publicly expressed philosophy and secret esoteric teachings has existed since the dawn of philosophy. If there is anything common between what philosophy is now and what it was in the days of Plato, it is the way in which philosophy regards itself as an open and rational form of discourse in contrast to claims of mystery, religious articles of faith, or the rhetoric of politicians. However, philosophy itself has never been entirely devoid of the characteristics it defines itself in opposition to.

Psychoanalysts would call it projection: when opposing something fiercely, one can easily start to show the very characteristics one intended to oppose. Within one of the dominant philosophical schools of the 20th century, poststructuralism, a similar conclusion was drawn from a different angle: identity is subordinated to difference. According to poststructuralists, a category such as philosophy does not in reality define itself as self-standing and then oppose itself in relation to something else that is different. Rather, the interplay of differences comes first, and seemingly self-identical categories are renewed constantly; thus, it creates an illusion of self-standing presences that later oppose themselves to all that is different from them.

In fact, thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Deleuze have all discussed esoteric topics and made similar arguments as scholars of esotericism about how grand categories, such as science, are not as clearly separated from esoteric discourses as the general narrative of "modern Western rationality" would have it. There is a lot that is interesting to say about esotericism and these "postmodern" thinkers, but that will mostly have to wait for another volume. There are at least two reasons why there is not much discussion about esotericism and those philosophers, such as the ones mentioned above, who have even actually engaged with it. First, they have not used the term "esotericism" to bind together various arguments related to, for example, Kabbalah, alchemy, and Boehme's theosophy. Second, they have mainly discussed esoteric discourses in the history of empirical sciences and not so much in the history of philosophy.

But there is, I argue, a more foundational background reason for why philosophers have not discussed esotericism. If esotericism is the "rejected other" of post-Enlightenment rationality, as Hanegraaff has suggested, the

self-identity of philosophy has traditionally been at the very core of that rationality. Being independent of the dogmas of religion and the limited perspectives of various empirical sciences, philosophy has presented itself as a self-standing rational exploration of anything whatsoever. Obviously it does not fit at all with this narrative that there has actually been an ongoing exchange of ideas between philosophers and esotericists. Before discussing how Hanegraaff's definition is best utilised from the philosophical perspective, it should be briefly addressed how his understanding of esotericism as "rejected" has been criticised during the last decade.

Esotericism as Rejected

Faivre was the one who solidified the study of esotericism as an academic field and distinguished it from earlier related studies, in which significant scholarly insights were often conflated with actual esotericist presumptions. However, Faivre soon came to be criticised for implicitly assuming that there is an "essence" of esotericism behind changing historical and geographical conditions. Whether this critique is warranted or not, avoidance of essentialism appears to be one of the main incentives in the contemporary study of esotericism. Even the quite strongly historicist approach of Hanegraaff has lately come under heavy critique in this respect. One edge of the critique has been directed towards Hanegraaff's very definition of esotericism as "rejected knowledge".

In order to assess this issue in more detail, Egil Asprem distinguishes between historiographical and historical approaches in terms of what is conceived of as rejected. The historiographical approach "concerns itself with how history is written, and the role that the *category* of esotericism plays within the writing of history" (Asprem 2021, 129), while the historical approach makes arguments about something actually being rejected. According to Asprem, this distinction is crucial, because without it scholarship of esotericism, against its own goals, easily becomes entangled with ideological pursuits, one way or another.

According to Asprem, Hanegraaff's main argument, "the pure version" of his rejected knowledge thesis, is correct overall. During early modernity, certain influential authors, such as Jacob Thomasius and, later, Johann Jacob Brucker, brought together currents conceived of as important "heresies", including neoplatonism, gnosticism, and hermeticism, which constituted the body of what became later known as esotericism. However, Asprem (2021, 131) argues that Hanegraaff does not systematically stick to this pure version of his thesis but falls back on an "inflated" version, in which those currents in practice come to be *essentially* rejected. In Asprem's view, Hanegraaff portrays them as something that have remained throughout the centuries as "the Other" of the "mainstream". If the critique is correct,

there are many different problems with the conception of esotericism as “rejected knowledge”. In general, it would come close to the essentialism that the approach is intended to oppose.

According to Asprem (2021, 132), there are five problems in Hanegraaff’s account: (1) the problem of defining the field, (2) the reinforcement of counter-canonical narratives, (3) the affirmation of insider self-understandings, (4) an undifferentiated view of “rejection processes”, and (5) a failure to address and explain “elected marginality”. I would summarise these critiques in terms of two issues, both of which have theoretical as well as practical consequences. First, esotericism remains underdefined; there are many issues that were rejected during the Enlightenment but which have little to do with esotericism. These include, for example, scientific accounts that were rejected on different grounds than being “esoteric”, or issues related to sex and race. Second, portraying esotericism as inherently rejected amplifies the counter-cultural discourses of esotericists themselves; in this way, they can gain additional “victim status” from the “official science” of the study of esotericism. Overall, “the imprecise usage of rejected knowledge in the inflated sense ... leads to confusions regarding *who, when, and for what reasons* a certain piece of knowledge assumes the status of the ‘rejected’” (Asprem 2021, 137).

In his forthcoming work *Esotericism in Western Culture: Counter-Normativity & Rejected Knowledge*, Hanegraaff argues that these critiques are based on misunderstandings which result from different interests that direct the critics’ study of esotericism and their corresponding different methodological background assumptions. My intention is not to choose sides in these debates within a field that I do not yet know so well but to take up what kind of challenges are potentially associated with discussing esotericism as rejected. This applies specifically to the field of philosophy, because there is no way to empirically show what kind of philosophical views are true or plausible.

Despite of the potential “dangers” in the perspective, esotericism *is* often rejected in ways that have hindered neutral scientific study. One example in which esotericism as rejected clearly explains a major gap in historiography is documented in Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander’s *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900* (2021). The forming of religious studies was in many ways entangled with esotericist views – and Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society, in particular – but this fact has gone almost unnoticed in the various historiographies of religious studies (Mühlematter & Zander 2021, 2). This neglect is hardly accidental. It looks obvious that those influences have been actively “rejected”, though the process need not be entirely conscious.

Jason Ananda Josephson Storm has also argued in his *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (2017) that many of the humanities and social sciences (including philosophy) were formed against the background of occult and spiritualist revivals, and that several key figures therein were actually influenced by this esoteric milieu even as they worked to define their disciplines as “scientific” and thus differentiate themselves from what they saw as backwards “superstitions”. On the other hand, in his *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* Asprem offers a lot of data from the history of natural sciences, in which the most celebrated scientists of the time had a close collaboration with esotericists, and the differences between science and esotericism were often quite blurred in practice.

The discipline of philosophy has its own specific characteristics when it comes to its esoteric influences and the dynamic of rejection therein. I am not aware of any former discussion about esotericism and the historiography of post-Kantian philosophy, but as this volume alone demonstrates, esotericism has influenced late-modern philosophy, just as it has influenced other fields of practice in society. The history of modern philosophy is generally told as a history of epistemology. Its starting point is Descartes’s *cogito* as alleged certain knowledge, which was contrasted against the Scholastic tradition, which dogmatically began philosophising from God. Probably the most important turning point was Kant’s “critical” or “transcendental” philosophy, after which the concept of “metaphysical” soon started to mean “not critical”. With the exception of German idealism (and its “post-idealist” heritage), modern philosophy after Kant has for a large part consisted of pointing out “metaphysical remains” in earlier philosophers (including Kant himself) and attempting to develop still more critical accounts. This applies to all major schools, from phenomenology and poststructuralism to logical positivism and analytical philosophy more generally. The fact that the meanings of “metaphysical” and “critical” were actually conceived of in various ways even within one philosophical school only emphasises the argument I am going to make.

It was only in the 1980s when Alain Badiou famously questioned the hegemony that metaphysics belongs to the “pre-critical” past of philosophy and argued that, to the contrary, classical metaphysics is at the very core of philosophy, and philosophy has too long been reduced to science (positivism and its descendants), politics (Marx), aesthetics (Nietzsche), or love (Lacan). If philosophy is going to defend itself as an independent discipline, metaphysics is the specific domain which separates philosophy from the empirical sciences. One could name the various schools (for example, object-oriented ontology and speculative realism) inspired by this turn as “new realisms”.

Before this return to (generally materialistic) metaphysics, judging something as “metaphysical” or “speculative” had largely the same pejorative function as the terms “esoteric” and “mystical”. On the contrary, when metaphysics again became a legitimate part of the discipline of philosophy, it was apparently crucial to separate “proper” metaphysics from mysticism and esotericism (remember, for example, Badiou’s disciple Meillassoux, who was discussed earlier in this introduction). However, this kind of separation sometimes appears contestable at best.

F.W.J. Schelling and Henri Bergson are two good examples of a close union of philosophy and esotericism.⁹ Many of both philosophers’ foundational ideas stem directly from esoteric and mystical thought. There is nothing controversial in this. As Sean McGrath (McGrath 2012, 22) aptly notes, in classical German studies of Schelling, his esoteric influences were widely known and recognised as a central element of his philosophy. These studies were mainly historical in orientation, and besides that, Schelling’s thought was generally approached as something that essentially paved the way for Hegel’s more systematic style of philosophising. However, an abrupt change in attitude towards Schelling’s esoteric influences took place in the “Schelling Renaissance” of the 1990s.

In contrast to the earlier narrative of the development of German idealism culminating in Hegel, many studies started to appear in which Schelling was interpreted as a sharp critic of Hegel and a forerunner of later “postmodern” and new realist approaches. From the perspective of this volume, it is noteworthy how in this new Schelling scholarship, his esoteric influences are usually sidestepped or even actively downplayed. For example, Jason Wirth argues in the introduction to his influential compilation *Schelling Now: Contemporary Readings* that Schelling is not a “loopy mystic” or “an antiquated theologian” (Wirth 2005, 6). The formulation implicitly gives the impression that if Schelling is going to be taken as an important and timely philosopher, he cannot at the same time be mystical. With Bergson, the historiography is very similar (see Ó Maoilearca’s chapter).

Interestingly, one of the few exceptions in contemporary Schelling scholarship is the work of the aggressively atheistic Slavoj Žižek, who recognises that Schelling’s esoteric ideas are not something peripheral and accidental to his philosophy:

Therein consists the unique intermediate position of Schelling, his double non-contemporaneity to his own time: he belongs to three discursive domains – he simultaneously, as it were, speaks three languages: the language of speculative idealism; the language of anthropomorphic-mystical theosophy; the post-idealist language of contingency and finitude. The paradox, of course, is that *it was his very “regression” from*

pure philosophical idealism to pre-modern theosophical problematic which enabled him to overtake modernity itself.

(Žižek 2007, 8)

Žižek recognises the “otherness” of Schelling’s esoteric influences from the perspective of established readings of the history of Western philosophy and the creative potential inherent in taking up these kinds of neglected ideas. It was actually already Žižek’s most important mentor, psychoanalyst and poststructuralist Jacques Lacan, who was fully conscious of the potential of Schelling’s and Hegel’s esoteric ideas, especially those stemming from Jacob Boehme’s theosophy. For example, Lacan adopted Boehme’s conception of the “divine mirror” Sophia into his unique psychoanalytical framework and transformed it into his well-known idea of the “mirror stage” in a child’s development (McGrath 2012, 68). Given how impenetrable Lacanian discourse is, and how it has had obvious “cultic” tendencies, one could even argue that Lacan was not only influenced by esotericism but that he *was* something like an “atheistic esotericist”.

Similarly, Schelling’s Boehmean cosmo-theological ideas of the will as the primal being and the different “moments” of the will have been analytically transformed into an account of a formal logical structure of different senses of being, first by Manfred Frank and Wolfram Högbe, and later by Markus Gabriel. Together with Žižek, all these authors are more or less associated with the “new realist” turn in late 20th-century philosophy. In his chapter in this volume, John Ó Maoilearca takes up an interesting question: if new materialism is different from the “old” materialism everyone is familiar with, what exactly is the element that makes it still “materialism” in the first place? As Ó Maoilearca notes, many of the arguments of new materialists were actually presented already 100 years before by various authors in the French philosophical movement of “new spiritualism”. If essentially the same ideas can be conceived of as either materialist or spiritualist, it appears that these central conceptions of the philosophical tradition are extremely fluid. Such fluidity is specifically a characteristic of esoteric thought, and already in Faivre’s definition of esotericism, the meaning of “imagination and mediations” meant essentially the fluidity of spirit and matter, and imagination as the link between them. The further one moves from the classical Enlightenment notions of matter and spirit, the more likely one can find esoteric influences in the background.

In general, there is an interesting dialectic between premodernity, modernity, and “postmodernity” in relationship to esotericism. On one hand, esotericism is associated with the premodern, in particular with more or less marginal forms of religious thought during an age when atheism was a rare exception. On the other, there seems to be a quite systematic

yet almost completely unexplored connection between esotericism and the “postmodern” critique of “classical modern” ideas. As Žižek puts it in the above quote on Schelling, esoteric ideas often have the potential to disassemble monolithic classical modern ideas. Unlike Žižek, however, I see no *prima facie* reason why some of the ideas in esoteric traditions could not be philosophically interesting by themselves and not just a means of criticising and historicising something else.

Limitations and Further Questions

As the first compiled volume (or monograph, for that matter) with a general focus on this vast and largely unexplored subject, out of necessity this book just scratches the surface of the issues discussed herein. Rather than offering a detailed theoretical account about the relationship of philosophy and esotericism or a thorough study of esoteric influences on a particular philosopher or philosophical movement, the aim of this book is to take up important and illustrative “cases” that one way or another demonstrate that the limit between academic philosophy and esotericism has never been as clear-cut as it is often assumed to be. Despite the fact that such a broad view can come at the expense of precise focus, it was practically necessary to limit the scope of the book in some crucial respects.

Timespan

The biggest of the limitations of the book already stands out in its title: the timespan begins around the turn of the 19th century. Exceptions are von Orelli’s chapter, which discusses the 18th-century thinker, Johann Georg Hamann, an important forerunner in Kabbalistic influences within German Romanticism, and the chapters of Christodoulou and Kondor, which take up the history of philosophy via a wide spectrum but with the intention of illuminating long-term affinities between philosophy and esotericism. There are several reasons for choosing the specific period of the last 200 years as the focus of this volume.

The first, purely accidental reason is that my scholarly expertise in philosophy is mostly limited to the modern post-Kantian period. The second, more substantial reason is that Kant with his “Copernican revolution” was the dividing line in the history of philosophy, after which many of the standards what we today regard as defining philosophy in the first place became established. Third, related to this, the term “esotericism” also came into being then, and the phenomena related to it started in many respects to be understood in at least a somewhat similar manner as in our age.¹⁰

The usefulness of the category of esotericism in the first place can also be questioned on various grounds. This fact becomes the more pressing the earlier the period in time that is in question, as the categories of “science”, “philosophy”, and “religion” were also conceived of very differently then, compared to the present. The further back we go in history, the more it becomes a matter of interpretation what counts as esoteric. Under no circumstances does this mean that investigations about the relationship between esotericism and philosophy were an implausible idea during earlier periods of time. On the contrary, they would be much needed to complement this volume. For example, esoteric aspects in the two huge rationalist philosophers of early modernity, Leibniz and Spinoza, would be a natural research topic. It has to be acknowledged, however, that there would be some additional difficulties in such an inquiry, and with my deficient knowledge in both the study of esotericism and pre-Kantian history of philosophy, I will leave the task to someone more qualified to perform it.

The fourth reason for choosing this time period is that I wanted this volume to contribute at least indirectly to contemporary philosophy also, not only to the history of philosophy. Obviously, this goal can be best achieved by concentrating on a period that is relatively close, historically speaking. For this reason, the qualifier “present” is included in the title and the volume features a separate section devoted to “substantial” questions, in contrast to merely “historical” ones. Last but not the least, the turn of the 19th century was the time of German idealism. German idealism is the foremost philosophical movement in which there were clear connections between philosophical and esoteric thought. In the general narrative of the history of thought, Romanticism is conceived in terms of opposition to Enlightenment rationalism, and German idealism was obviously aligned with Romanticism, even though the philosophers usually maintained distance from the most stereotypical Romantic ideas. Keeping Hanegraaff's definition of esotericism in mind, opposition to Enlightenment rationalism is evidently something associated with esotericism as well, and it is no coincidence that some of the most obvious esoteric influences in the history of modern philosophy can be found in German post-Kantian philosophy.

While there is a deeper argument I would like to make, it would require a monograph of its own to present properly. Esotericism in German idealism is far from a mere curiosity in the history of philosophy. When it comes to “continental philosophy” (and Marxism as well), German idealism has been – and still is – the greatest single source of ideas, even if its influence has often been one of opposition. Be it “post-idealism” (Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc.), existentialism, Marxism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, or poststructuralism, German idealism (and especially Hegel) is always in the background, and often explicitly discussed. If esoteric influences in

German idealism are not just something the philosophers flirted with but something that they assimilated into the very core of their central ideas, as can be quite well argued, then there is an esoteric undercurrent running through late-modern philosophy in general.

“Western” Esotericism?

Another important issue concerns the fact that the volume deals mostly with what is commonly called “Western” esotericism. Only around 10% of scholarship of philosophy in general concerns anything else than “Western” philosophy, despite the fact that, for example, India and China have much older traditions of philosophy than Europe. In the study of esotericism, the study of non-Western conceptions and practices is arguably more common today. Consequently, it has to be briefly addressed why this volume lacks proper global representation, and why the specifying adjective “Western” is not in the title, even when it has been customary to talk about “Western esotericism” in the study of esotericism.

Today, when academic study of esotericism as a self-proclaimed field of research is over 30 years old, many of its central conceptions, such as the specifying adjective “Western”, have become critically analysed. In the introductory chapter to *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, Egil Asprem and Julian Strube explain how it has become hegemonic to talk about “Western” esotericism: “The term [Western] was originally adopted as a qualifying adjective intended to cordon off the field from universalist and perennialist approaches that had assumed a timeless and essential esotericism, manifesting across history in many separate cultures” (Asprem & Strube 2021, 2). When the study of esotericism was establishing itself as a new academic discipline, it was central to emphasise the empirical and historical character of research in contrast to actually esoteric or “half-scientific” authors such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, or Carl Jung, who often assumed unproblematically that there is a metaphysical, universal common source behind similar religious phenomena around the world. Addressing that specifically “Western” esotericism is being discussed was intended as taking a clear distance from such actual esoteric ahistorical presumptions.

However, Asprem and Strube continue to argue that since the 1990s, the qualifier “Western” has itself become a hindrance to the outspoken ideals of the study of esotericism:

The newfound identity of a “Western” esotericism construed in historicist rather than essentialist terms also came to introduce a new and largely tacit form of cultural essentialism: whatever else esotericism

might have been, it was uniquely “Western”, and would retain this unique characteristic no matter where in the world “it” travelled.

(Asprem & Strube 2021, 2)

An obvious example of what Asprem and Strube (2021, 3) mean is that, for example, alchemy developed mainly in Islamic culture into the form that has been referred to as the standard example of “Western” esotericism – after it was adopted by Europeans during the Renaissance. Referring to Marco Pasi, Strube (2021, 48) puts the issue especially clearly: if it is argued that esotericism is an inherently Western conception and cannot be applied meaningfully outside the West, then it should follow that there is no need to add the adjective “Western”.¹¹ Consequently, it is evident that esotericism is a meaningful conception globally, even though the global perspective brings many theoretical challenges with it. Scholars that have taken seriously the implicit colonialism in the study of esotericism emphasise that a proper postcolonial study of esotericism requires relevant background knowledge, such as knowledge of the local culture and history, command of the languages in the source materials, and preferably experience in postcolonial studies.

As this is the first compilation about the relationship of philosophy and esotericism, the same limitations that concern the timespan apply also to geography. Discussion about what philosophy means outside the classical Western canon is still relatively marginal, as is the study of the relationship between Western and non-Western philosophy. While adding the study of esotericism to these discussions would no doubt enable interesting and possibly even revolutionary perspectives, it would require multidisciplinary expertise that very few people, if any, have. It would not be reasonable to attempt to discuss all possible aspects related to philosophy and esotericism at once in this pioneering volume. For the sake of simplicity, I have decided not to include the qualifier “Western” to the title of this volume, even if the chapters mainly address questions related to issues that have been traditionally conceived of as Western philosophy and esotericism. This is not meant as a statement in the controversy discussed above but as a means to avoid participating in it at this point. While Ayoub’s chapter in this volume discusses the parallels between “Western” and Islamic esoteric influences in philosophy, apart from that not much discussion about non-Western esotericism and philosophy is to be found.

Philosophy and the Study of Esotericism

In commenting on a draft version of this introduction, Hanegraaff noticed the absence of a more systematic discussion about the philosophical backgrounds of the various approaches in the study of esotericism. Such

a discussion would be something that a scholar of esotericism no doubt expects from a volume like this. Unfortunately, however, none of the chapters discuss the study of esotericism in any detail. The reason for this is simply that, being philosophers, most of the authors lack the required acquaintance with the study of esotericism.

For scholars of esotericism (and humanities more broadly), the object of the study is some historical phenomenon – in this case, esotericism. For philosophers, on the contrary, the object of the study comprises various truth questions related to some theme (in this case, esotericism) or its relevance for the history of philosophy. The main goal of the volume is to show to the philosophical community that esotericism is not an irrelevant or trivial issue any more than religion or art, for example, and that esoteric thought plays a much more significant part in the history of late modern philosophy than is usually acknowledged. Various authors refer to scholars of esotericism in their chapters, but mostly in order to present some definitions to the philosophical audience.

From the viewpoint of the study of esotericism, the approaches of this volume therefore often lack precision in discussing esotericism. However, it is only after esotericism in general has been successfully introduced as a topic worthy of examination for philosophers that more specific philosophical questions concerning *the concept of esotericism* become crucial. After “philosophy of esotericism” has established a presence in the discipline of philosophy, “philosophy of the study of esotericism” will hopefully become a collaborative field between philosophers and scholars of esotericism.

The Structure of the Volume

The volume is divided in two sections. The first section deals with “substantial” questions, that is, something one could call “philosophy of esotericism” – a subdivision of philosophy that does not yet exist but hopefully will after this volume. In the chapters within this section, the main focus is on making arguments about the relationship of philosophy and esotericism on a more or less general level. The second section, on the contrary, is more historical in orientation, being primarily concerned with esoteric influences on major philosophers and philosophical traditions. However, some chapters in the first section stretch back in history all the way to deepest antiquity, and many of the historical chapters address contemporary questions, at least indirectly.

In the opening chapter of the volume, Zsuzsanna Kondor argues that despite philosophy and esotericism being opposed to each other in principle, certain similarities between the two practices can be found throughout

history. In the ancient world, philosophy was often taught in tightly closed small groups, which was also the practice in mystery cults. Today philosophy is highly specialised, and in this way academic philosophical discourse is made practically inaccessible to outsiders. In both philosophy and esotericism, expressibility and transcendence are also a source of continuing debates in ways that do not ultimately differ so fundamentally from each other.

In the next chapter, Marina Christodoulou argues that there are three foundational principles that are the same in esotericism and in classical philosophy: connection, aspiration, and questioning. Conceptions such as oneness, the Absolute, or simply God have been foundational for philosophy and esotericism alike, and behind these conceptions there has been a similar ideal of connectedness. Both esotericism and philosophy have also emphasised aspiration, the cultivation of one's strengths, and a systematic attempt to overcome one's weaknesses. Related to this, both idealise questioning; the truth is never ready at hand as divine revelation or as a scientific discovery but requires sacrificing one's life to the quest, sometimes even through actual martyrdom. It is only in relatively recent philosophical practice that the classical ideals have largely diminished.

Antti Piilola concentrates on the conception of gnosis – central in the study of esotericism – and argues that most philosophers and scholars of esotericism alike lack conceptual finesse when it comes to discussing mystical experience. Piilola distinguishes three central aspects in discussing mysticism: the mystical object, the mystical subject, and the mystical experience. According to Piilola, the central condition for a philosophically viable view about mysticism is the coherence between these three aspects. Drawing from the existing tradition of philosophy of mysticism, Piilola argues for the plausibility of an essentialist view of an ineffable but universal truth inherent in mysticism.

Adas Diržys takes up the bold task of opening a philosophical discussion about actual occult practice in the contemporary context. He bases his analysis on the ideas of Peter Hamilton-Giles, an occult author who can be considered as one of the main proponents of the “traditional witchcraft” movement. While practising occultists tend to emphasise magical practice on the expense of philosophical theory, Hamilton-Giles is well educated in phenomenology and hermeneutics. He not only justifies his occult practices philosophically but also attempts to make the practice itself more holistic by means of philosophical reflection. Diržys discusses several issues related to the practice of traditional witchcraft (many of which apply also to esotericism more broadly), such as the “reality” of magic based on the interplay of ontological presence and absence, the distinction between reflection and meta-reflection, and different levels of the self.

In the last chapter of the first section, Emanuele Curcio addresses a critical view of esotericism in the work of Marxist and Jewish scholar Furio Jesi, who is known for his extensive work (mostly in Italian only) on mythology and myths. According to Jesi, there is no essence of myth. Therefore, it is not appropriate to understand what myth is but how it works. In fact, esotericism seems to be one of the ways how the recall of myth functions. Curcio highlights that from Jesi's perspective, esotericism always involves an intensification of myth. Esotericism in this sense is definable as an attempt to access a past memory, a place of a deep; something that is spiritual, but whose origin is lost. Curcio discusses novelists and poets, some of whom, by addressing different currents of esotericism, have fallen prey to a technical use of myths and in this way facilitate authoritarian thought without necessarily intending to do so, while others manage to use myths in a productive way.

The second section begins with three chapters that mostly discuss esotericism in German Romanticism and idealism. James von Orelli takes up Johann Georg Hamann as a highly influential figure for later Romantic philosophers in utilising Kabbalistic ideas within philosophy. Hamann, a self-proclaimed "Kabbalistic philologist", is particularly inspired by the way in which single words and even letters are interpreted in highly creative and seemingly random ways in the Kabbalistic tradition. After Hamann, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis develop his ideas further into unique accounts that combine aesthetics, metaphysics, and philosophy of language. Last, von Orelli takes up Gershom Scholem – a famous scholar of Kabbalah and a friend of many (if not most) major Jewish philosophers in the 20th century – as a thinker who brought the interplay of Kabbalah and Romanticism full circle. While the Romantic philosophers used Kabbalah for philosophical purposes, Scholem, in his turn, expressed a long-term affinity with Romanticism.

Glenn Alexander Magee (2008) is the author of *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, the first distinctively philosophical work that discusses esoteric influences in philosophy. In this volume, Magee continues the study of Hegel's esoteric influences and also takes up Schelling's similar tendencies. The esoteric influences of both thinkers are deep, varied, and often very openly expressed. Magee divides his discussion into three different themes: (1) the influence of Jacob Boehme and Christian theosophy more broadly, (2) the influence of Swabian "speculative Pietism" and Kabbalah, and (3) the interest in occult phenomena, such as "animal magnetism".

Stavros Panayiotou compares the role of esoteric thought in Hegel's and Levinas's philosophies. Here, "esoteric" is not so much associated with the mystical as with the "inner". Panayiotou addresses the question, is thought necessarily tied to some kind of interiority? Based on Hegel's

phenomenology of common sense and Levinas's divine command ethics, he argues that not every discourse is a relation with interiority. By a careful analysis of how there is a subtle dialectic between immanence and transcendence in both Hegel and Levinas, Panayiotou shows that their basic philosophical commitments are not as incompatible as is usually thought.

The last five chapters address esoteric influences in "post-idealism", phenomenology, and pragmatism as broadly understood. Erik Kuravsky interprets Heidegger as a philosopher who systematises the esoteric conception of gnosis into an ontological-phenomenological exploration of the meaning of "truth". Differing from ordinary "theoretic" truths, Heidegger presents a model of "aporetic" truth. Understood in this way, Heidegger's somewhat cryptic presentation has nothing to do with the esoteric as purposefully concealed or as something that only few extraordinary individuals can have access to. Such conceptions of truth (despite being in some sense esoteric or mystical) still operate within the ordinary Western theoretical conception of truth, which, according to Heidegger, is inherently linked to modern technological "forgetfulness of being". Aporetic truth, on the contrary, is hidden because of the interplay of presence and concealment within the ontological structure of being as such.

Sami Pihlström takes up a figure in the history of philosophy and religious science that is very often linked to esotericism: William James. For example, Mühlematter and Zander's *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900* often refers to James, and his acquaintance with esotericism seems to be taken as self-evident. Pihlström argues that, despite several of his interests being associated with the esoteric, James's philosophy cannot really be taken as an example of the intersection of esotericism and philosophy. According to Pihlström, James approaches heterodox theories and phenomena in the context of his philosophical pragmatism; esotericism can be a source of profound meaning for those individuals who have a temperament that is drawn to it, but James's sympathy to the esoteric does not go further than recognising the possible positive existential-moral impact that esotericism can have on a person's life.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, esoteric influences appear to be less frequent (or at least less obvious) within analytical philosophy than within continental philosophy. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm takes up one counter-example in the "critical realist" Roy Bhaskar. It is generally known that Bhaskar grew up in a theosophical family, and that towards the later stages of his life he showed an open commitment to theosophy. However, Storm argues that theosophy, together with the related current of New Age, shaped Bhaskar's ideas behind the project of critical realism from the start. In particular, Storm connects Bhaskar's peculiar scientific realism to

his theosophical view about religious truth. According to Bhaskar, there is a structured reality independent of mind, which scientific practice can reach and describe objectively from various angles, but never in its complete totality. Storm shows how this view is a modification of the theosophical conviction that different religions speak about the same divine reality from different perspectives.

As discussed earlier in the introduction, Henri Bergson is together with Friedrich Schelling one of the most obvious examples of heavy esoteric influences in the philosophical canon. John Ó Maoilearca discusses Bergson's esoteric influences but goes further to explore another illuminating angle on the subject. Henri's sister Mina was a highly influential feminist, occultist, and artist. While there is not much documentation on the collaboration of the Bergsons, there are striking parallels between their work within their completely different domains of practice. Both are highly critical of the prevalent dualism between matter and spirit in modern Western culture and concerned with the ways of how the spiritual materialises and matter can be seen as spiritual. Both Bergsons also pay particular attention to images and imagination in this respect. For them, imagination is not simply "inside the head"; forming an image is seen as the first step towards materialising something. Matter, on the other hand, is understood in close connection to images, as the visual nature of many of Henri Bergson's central concepts already suggests.

In the final chapter of the volume Tareq Ayoub discusses the concept of esotericism within the Islamic context. Ayoub focuses particularly on how the temporal elements of the soul and afterlife are conceptualised in Islamic esotericism. He takes up several parallels between the Western theological-philosophical canon and Islamic philosophy, beginning from Meister Eckhart, and argues that Edith Stein's phenomenology in particular can be illuminating when thinking about soul and time in the Islamic context. According to Ayoub, Stein's peculiar conception of the *Aevum* can be interpreted as parallel to the Muslim conception of the *Barzakh*, which allows a fruitful exchange of ideas both directions.

Notes

- 1 While there are obviously many more philosophical works that are absolutely relevant to this issue, here I take up only those works that self-consciously connect themselves to esotericism. In a roughly chronological order, these include: Cyril O'Regan's (2001, 2002, 2014) "gnostic" reading of Hegel and German Idealism in the works *The Heterodox Hegel*, followed by *Gnostic Return in Modernity*, *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme's Haunted Narrative*, and *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar's Response*

to *Philosophical Modernity, Volume 1: Hegel*, Glenn Alexander Magee's *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* and his edited volume *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, many of Sean McGrath's works but especially *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious*, Joshua Ramey's (2012) *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and Spiritual Ordeal* and his edited volume with Matthew S. Haar Farris (2016), *Speculation, Heresy, and Gnosis in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion: The Enigmatic Absolute*, and finally, John Ó Maoilearca's *Matter, the Meta-Spiritual, and the Forgotten Bergson: Vestiges of a Philosophy*.

- 2 "Empirical" is itself a multidimensional conception, of course. It can be argued that mathematics is in certain sense the most strictly non-empirical science there is, because mathematical objects can be seen as ideal, entirely independent from any kind of material reality. However, what I am referring to here as empirical is the possibility to confirm "objectively" what is the correct answer to a given question. In this respect, from all the sciences mathematics is obviously the furthest away from philosophy.
- 3 "Perennialism" is a commonly used expression in the study of esotericism denoting thought which is based on the assumption of a "perennial truth". The idea of such a truth is quite old, and the term "perennial" appears already in the Renaissance as *philosophia perennis*. *Prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis* were conceptions of Renaissance neo-hermeticists, who attempted to reconcile the special revelation of Christianity with the newly discovered fact that ideas very similar to the core Christian doctrines were present long before the appearance of Christianity.
- 4 This is actually a simplification of Faivre's multifaceted life and career. For example, he had already done a quite strictly historically oriented study long before the 1990s, along with his more "religionist" agenda. For a detailed study of Faivre's life, career, and ideas, see Hanegraaff, Brach & Pasi 2022.
- 5 Faivre's definition is also criticised as too limited, for it applies best to the neo-hermeticism of the Renaissance and to the Romantic philosophy of nature, in which many elements can be traced back to neo-hermeticism, and on which Faivre was a specialist (Zander 2021, 18). On the other hand, that which one could think of as the most minimal possible requirement for esoteric thought (which von Stuckrad's analysis relies solely on), secrecy or concealment, does not appear in Faivre's list (Zander 2021, 17–18). Glenn Magee has suggested an updated definition of esotericism based on Faivre. Magee defines esotericism in terms of four characteristics: (1) a qualitative approach to understanding nature – as opposed to the quantitative approach of modernity, (2) a reliance on subjectivity and subjective impressions of a highly rarefied nature – as opposed to the rejection of the subjective in favour of what is "objective" and measurable, (3) knowledge claims regarding other aspects of reality (or other sorts of beings) accessible only by those subjective means – as opposed to the narrowly defined empiricism of modernity, and (4) reverence for the authority of tradition as a source of truth – as opposed to modernity's rejection of tradition and insistence that history is the record of our emergence from darkness into the light (Magee 2016, xxvi).

- 6 For a comprehensive documentation of the first ten years of this research unit, see Hanegraaff and Pijnenburg's *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam* (2009).
- 7 Of course, things are again a bit more complicated when looked more closely. As Egil Asprem points out, knowledge claims in post-Enlightenment esotericism often "appear less like gnosis and more like *expansions of reason*" (Asprem 2014, 438). According to Asprem, modern esotericism is not always associated with gnosis in the strict sense discussed by Hanegraaff but rather with what Asprem calls "open-ended naturalism". Since it is an undeniable fact that the very ideas of reason and science are historical, esotericists' claims about the limitedness of the scope of science and reason as they are understood in the mainstream cannot be sidestepped arrogantly, even if in many cases evident contradictions and "will to believe" can be found behind such arguments.
- 8 In his recent article, Olav Hammer (2020, 7–8), one of the most prolific scholars of esotericism, has even argued that the whole demarcation between esotericism and mysticism is theoretically useless. According to him, we should either use a higher-order category that blends esotericism and mysticism together or more specific lower-order categories such as "alchemy" or "traditionalism". The central factor in Hammer's higher-order category would be a charismatic visionary getting his or her vision "legitimated" by an influential group of followers. However, the usefulness of a conception depends on the field to which it applies. Hammer writes from the perspective of the study of esotericism, but when it comes to the discipline of philosophy, I hope I will be able to point out in this introduction that esotericism is a useful category in connection to philosophical questions.
- 9 For more detailed analyses of both, see the chapters of Magee and Ó Maoilearca in this volume, respectively.
- 10 Even though the adjective "esoteric" was common already in antiquity, it is important to note that the substantive "esotericism" appears for the first time in Jacques Matter's *Histoire critique du gnosticisme et de son influence* published in 1828 (Hanegraaff et al. 2006, 337). Even then, it appeared very rarely anywhere until the last two decades of the 19th century (Zander 2021, 14).
- 11 For the view of retaining the talk about Western esotericism, see Hanegraaff 2015. Hanegraaff argues: "I believe it makes sense to continue speaking of 'Western esotericism'. *Not*, to be sure, for theoretical reasons, but strictly for reasons of method – and more specifically, of *historical* method. ... If we apply historical method consistently, then *our object of study is never 'esotericism' in any strict theoretical sense*, for such an object exists only as a theoretical construct in our own heads and not as a historical or empirical reality 'out there'. What we should really forego is the illusion that we are studying some kind of 'phenomenon out there', called 'esotericism'!" (Hanegraaff 2015, 81).

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Part I

Substantial and Methodological Questions



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1 Esoteric Endeavours in Philosophy¹

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Defining the Esoteric

The Esoteric and Western Esotericism

The etymology of *esoteric* reaches back to the second century. The Greek ἔσωτέρω (*esōtērō*) means “further inside”, ἔσωτερικός (*esōterikós*) refers to “belonging to an inner circle”. It appeared in Europe first in German (*Esoterik*) at the end of the 18th century, then in French (*l'ésotérisme*), and by the end of the 19th century, in English. In harmony with its etymology, according to the Cambridge dictionary,² *esoteric* nowadays refers to that which is “very unusual and understood or liked by only a small number of people, especially those with special knowledge; intended for or understood by only a few people who have special knowledge”.

Esotericism is meant to describe certain patterns recognisable in intellectual history. Though structural similarities can be recognised amongst worldviews and thinkers, esotericism³ incorporates many diverse theories and practices such as spirituality, mysticism, different alternative healing practices, Gnosticism, and Hermetism⁴ – just to name a few. In this chapter, I will focus on the ancient roots of Western esotericism, particularly the legacy of Hermes Trismegistus. His heritage comprises significant spiritual texts from ancient Egypt, paving the way for esotericism.⁵ Here, I will explore the metaphysical and methodological parallels between Trismegistus’ heritage and philosophical theories while deliberately bypassing practice-oriented modifications. The ancient sources of Hermetism enable a focus on theoretical issues, particularly on the role that language and transcendence play in the so-called founding scripts of the esoteric tradition and in more recent philosophy.

Relating Philosophy and Esotericism in Terms of Conceptual Changes

To start, I will take a short historical excursion that will help us understand how esotericism and philosophy relate to each other against the background of some conceptual changes. I use the plural because although *gnōsis* plays a decisive role in demarcating different realms of human intellect, its meaning is intertwined with other terms, like *logos* and *nous*, and importantly, it bears a unique relation to divine transcendence.

Gnōsis is a Greek word for knowledge. However, its meaning is more specific than the English term. There is an important difference between propositional knowledge (as in the German *wissen*, and the French *savoir*) and knowledge by immediate acquaintance (like the German *kennen*, and the French *connaître*). Additionally, the ultimate object of *gnōsis*, this unique form of knowledge is accessible exclusively via the *nous* as universal/cosmic awareness, but not via the individual intellect (Hanegraaff 2022, 162). That is, in late Antiquity, *gnōsis* signified a distinctive form of salvific knowledge, enabling the soul's liberation from material entanglement to reunite with the divine mind. Perception in spiritual dimensions is related to "higher senses" similar to, but not identical with, perceptual bodily modalities such as hearing or sight. According to the Nag Hammadi papyri,⁶ *nous* allows comprehension, *logos* facilitates interpretation, and *gnōsis* leads to acquaintance with the divine. These important nuances had been modified; yet in the *Asclepius*⁷ the Latin translation suggests: by *feeling/sense*, we may know you; by *reason*, we may explore you with suspicions; by understanding/knowledge, we may know you understandingly.⁸ According to the earlier version,

the attainment of *gnōsis* is what the path is all about, we can receive it only thanks to our noetic capacity, and thanks to *logos* we can communicate with others to speak on divinity's behalf. The prayer continues by thanking God for actually deifying the practitioners, not after death but already during their present state of embodiment, so that they were able to receive *gnōsis*.

(Hanegraaff 2022, 234)

Similarly, important nuances faded away due to later translation of *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino, who failed to capture the specific connotations of *gnōsis* (rendered as *cognitio*) and its related terms. Although scholars of the 15th century had no access to the Nag Hammadi papyri, Ficino's contemporary, Lodovico Lazzarelli provided an alternative translation of the Hermetic message. For him, the essence of the Hermetica lies in the pursuit of attaining salvific knowledge concerning one's own divine essence and origin, achieved through an ecstatic elevation to the

realm of light (Hanegraaff 2016, 384). Lazzarelli paid little attention to Plato or later Platonists and mediated a genuine picture of the Hermetic tradition. Notwithstanding, his influence was limited. The Platonic heritage and the so-called Platonic Orientalist tradition gained more attention and overshadowed the authentic Hermetic tradition.⁹

A negative perception of Gnosticism began to emerge over time, culminating in the late 16th century with the development of a comprehensive negative narrative. This narrative portrayed Gnosticism as originating from “Oriental barbarism”, extending through Pythagoras, Plato, and Platonism, and leading to the 16th-century vision of Gnosticism. Intriguingly, the “virtual-founder” of anti-apologetism, the Protestant Thomasius considered *gnōsis* as an important element in gaining knowledge about the divine, distinguishing it from the legitimate but limited knowledge accessible by philosophy and the superior knowledge revealed by God, accessible via faith. This distinction gained a more demarcated form in the historian of philosophy, Jacob Brucker’s *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabulis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta*, which was a crucial repository of knowledge regarding the history of philosophy in Europe. He distinguished three main realms of human intellect: (1) the history of philosophy as it serves for the establishment of philosophy as a new academic discipline based on human reason; (2) biblical revelation as the ground of true religion where faith provides the establishment of true knowledge (it is important to note that reason and revelation could not contradict each other; however, they were autonomous and incomparable, each confined to its own domain); and finally (3) the historical narrative of (crypto) pagan religion as the antithesis of both (Hanegraaff 2010).

This separation of the three domains implies that the third “became academically homeless for centuries” (Hanegraaff 2013, 2). Philosophy is devoted to reason and the most ambitious enterprise is to query the limits of its reach. That is, *gnōsis*, according to the earliest accessible translation of Hermes Trismegistus’ legacy, was the knowledge of the truth by which the soul can be liberated from its material entanglements. The ultimate object of *gnōsis* is inaccessible by reason. It is accessible exclusively by *nous*, in more recent terms, via the universal consciousness, as a special gift from God.¹⁰

There was a misinterpretation of *gnōsis*, partly because of limited access to the Hermetic texts and partly because of the influence of other ancient traditions, such as Zoroaster’s in the case of Ficino. *Gnōsis* as it was understood in the Hermetic tradition was excluded from religious and philosophical inquiries for centuries. Consequently, esotericism gradually became “academically homeless” and ideas common with Hermetism survived as hidden brooks in philosophy.

Philosophy

These hidden brooks were sometimes spectacular, and consequently excluded from academic discourse, while others were well-discussed though not considered to be esoteric. Questions recently considered as belonging to philosophy were originally asked by sages and clerics – a privileged few. Later, philosophy entered the scene, but its field of interest was not limited to the realm of cognition, nature, and social phenomena; the transcendent and the divine were incorporated in an organic manner. Thanks to slight and gradual terminological changes during the past 2000 years of Western philosophy, the stage for modern science had been established, and scientific discoveries gained more significance in intellectual life. During the Enlightenment a questioning of the authority of the divine and supernatural emerged. In line with these tendencies, philosophy shifted its focus towards worldly phenomena, resulting in the gradual disappearance of the spiritual realm within the field.¹¹

As in the field of the sciences, specialisation had been actuated in philosophy. Specialisation entails discriptions resulting in branches that focus on narrow and well-specified fields that require the knowledge of a specific framework and a specialised vocabulary. Anyone who is not familiar with the terminology, emblematic paradoxes, and examples as illustrations of the schools of different sub-disciplines, can hardly join the ongoing discourse in such schools. What thinks a literate intellectual when “Mary’s room” or the “swamp man” pop up as an argument? Perdurantism vs. endurantism in metaphysics, disjunctivism in metaphysics and epistemology, and externalism and internalism in the philosophy of mind refer to a complete network of presuppositions, relations, theories, and arguments. That is, the specific knowledge necessary to understand even the questions is accessible only for the participants of a certain language-game of the school or tradition. As the etymological root of “esoteric” suggests, nowadays some branches of philosophy are accessible for a restricted, and in a way insider, group of individuals.

Additionally, in contemporary academic philosophy there is a significant effort to align with scientific methodologies, whether through referencing scientific evidence or presenting logical arguments. This assimilation often involves reducing accessible phenomena to scientifically approachable ones, yet it may not fully accommodate philosophy’s broader inquiries beyond empirical matters, such as metaphysics or moral philosophy. Furthermore, meeting scientific criteria like testability and measurability poses challenges for philosophy. While philosophical schools generally distance themselves from esotericism in their self-understanding, some philosophers are perceived as “esoteric”, while others are seen as ambiguous or lacking in logical or scientific rigour, such as in the case

when analytic philosophers accuse certain proponents of continental philosophy.

Despite the similarities in accessibility of both esoteric and philosophical content, the absence of supranatural and spiritual elements in contemporary philosophy, coupled with its growing alignment with the sciences, widens the gap between modern esotericism and philosophy. However, as we will see, restricting philosophy's subject to scientifically approachable phenomena and aligning it with the criteria of the scientific method has led to endeavours suggesting a radical shift in perspective. This shift entails reaching beyond mundane experiences in order to better understand worldly phenomena, mitigate methodological limitations, and open oneself towards the transcendent.

The Ineffable Truth

The curious situation whereby our most commonly used means in intellectual discourse, language, is not sufficient to reveal the truth, the ultimate reality, and the operation of the universe, and so on, is present in numerous ancient texts. In some texts, this insufficiency of language is expressed explicitly, and sometimes it takes the form of ambiguous and paradoxical formulations. However, we can find the expression of language's insufficiency in different traditions and texts, such as Daoist and Vedic scripts,¹² and also in fragments of Heraclitus. In this chapter, I will refer to Hermetism because its heritage in Western thought is present and closely related to esotericism; and importantly, Hermetism explicitly expressed that while ultimate truth is accessible, it cannot be made fully accessible via language.

As what follows, we will see similar endeavours in the case of Bergson and Heidegger. Heidegger attempted to reveal the roots of Western forgetfulness concerning *logos* and *Being*, while Bergson attempted to illuminate the intrinsic relation between humans and their language and explicate language's distortive character.

Logos in Hermetism

As we can see, *logos* allows us to become interpreters of God's will, and through it we can communicate with others, representing divinity's voice (Hanegraaff 2022, 234). Additionally, *logos* is inseparable from the ultimate divine reality, *nous*. Accordingly, the concept of *logos* appears to serve as a mediator between human consciousness and the foundational polarities of Hermetic metaphysics – matter and *nous*. Understanding these polarities seems contingent upon direct personal experience, as they cannot be fully grasped through any other means (Hanegraaff 2022, 203).

Although *logos* plays an indispensable role in the maintenance of the relation between the divine and human, as “reasoned discourse”, *logos* “does not lead as far as the truth” (Hanegraaff 2016, 282).

Though *logos* is the mediator between the material, sensual world, and *nous*, the ultimate divine reality, knowledge conveyed by words is far from complete. The revelation of truth, comprehending the divine, is possible through experience and faith. Though the triad of transcendentals (goodness, beauty, and truth) is tightly interwoven with the Hermetic concepts of *gnōsis* and the divine, which relates it to the experience of love, a deeper exploration of this interplay reaches far beyond the focus of the present chapter. Notwithstanding, it is important to keep in mind that with the help of *logos*, we may have some insight into what our senses mediate about the world; *logos* can illuminate coherence thanks to its direct relation with *nous*. When *logos* operates as the mediator between human beings, it in itself is insufficient for being able to reach the divine essence. There is a need for immersion with faith in the conveyed knowledge gaining direct experiences about and direct access to *nous*.

Heidegger on Logos and Language

Heidegger seeks the reason for language’s devaluation. In a nutshell, he suggests this process started at the beginning of ancient Greek philosophy when the shift of attention moved towards the establishment of things as beings gradually effacing *Being* as an elementary condition of existence. Consequently, in the epoch from Anaximander to Nietzsche, the truth of *Being* remained hidden (Heidegger 1976, 369).

Heidegger’s enterprise to establish *fundamental ontology* starts with the criticism of the dominant intellectualist view of philosophy forgetting about the primordial relation between humans and their environment and the immanent transcendence of *Being*. He describes this as the result of the history of metaphysics during which some crucial terms had been distorted. I will focus on *aletheia* and *logos* as Heidegger reconstructs them. *Aletheia* and *logos* are closely related because *aletheia*, according to Heidegger, can be understood in terms of concealment vs. unconcealment; while *logos* has revealing potential significant for human beings. The alterations of the meaning of these terms illuminate how Western metaphysics lost its capacity to see the primordial relation between human beings and their ambient world.

According to Heidegger, “λόγος gets ‘translated’ (and this means that it is always getting interpreted) as ‘reason’, ‘judgment’, ‘concept’, ‘definition’, ‘ground’, or ‘relationship’. But how can ‘discourse’ be so susceptible of modification that λόγος can signify all the things we have listed, and in good scholarly usage” (Heidegger 1962, 55)? In line with its function in

Hermetic tradition, *logos* as discourse has a kind of revealing force: “The λόγος lets something be seen (φαίνεσθαι), namely, what the discourse is about ... Discourse ‘lets something be seen’ ἀπο ...: that is, it lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about” (Heidegger 1962, 56). In other words, *logos* refers to the process of making-manifest or letting-be-seen through language. Language reveals the existence of things around us, and simultaneously illuminates their presence or, as a preservative force, their lack of presence, their absence. In this way, we can gain a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of *Being*, human beings, and the things surrounding us.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger reconstructed how the primordial meaning of *logos* has changed, ultimately referring to logic and representation. Because *logos* primordially relates to discourse, it can be considered as talk (what makes something accessible to others) and what is said. Furthermore, the concept of *logos*, understood as the act of letting something be seen, has undergone modifications, and it has been erroneously interpreted as “the primary locus of truth” (Ibid. 57) due to subtle misinterpretations such as judgements and propositions being regarded as related to truth vs. falsity. But, according to Heidegger’s etymological and historical investigations, *logos* primordially is about “letting something to be seen” and “bringing something to presence”. From this perspective, Western logic and linguistic analysis with their focus on truth-conditions and correspondence have little relevance. We can talk about correspondence if we focus on the representative character of an utterance; that is, if we exclusively consider the referential relation between the linguistic symbol and its referent, instead of noticing how distant things, persons, and/or occurrences come into presence here and now. Heidegger considers representation as significantly distancing and alienating from the subject in question. As he wrote “to represent [vorstellen] means to bring what is present at hand [*das Vorhandene*]¹³ before oneself as something standing over against, to relate it to oneself, to the one representing it” (Heidegger 1977a, 131). This change in perspective has far-reaching effects on the comprehension of the human being as a distinguished being, *Dasein*, immersed into its environment and aware of the significance of its being. Difficulties arise regarding the integrity of the self (the relation between individuals and society, individualism, and subjectivism). The alienating force of representation ultimately separates humans from their habitual ambience and leads to the dominance of the *theoretical attitude*.

As we can see in *Being and Time*, *logos* “made itself mundane” through language. Because of this manifestation, language became “an element of the world” akin to other things; thus, it “can be treated like other things in the world” (Corngold 1979, 106). The interpretation of

logos by Heidegger and that found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* exhibit a surprisingly close alignment. Though there was no specific term for language in ancient Greek, the concept of *logos* as both a mediator between *nous* and matter, and a mediator for communication among humans implies a remarkably similar distinction. In the Hermetic context, *logos* makes our material world coherent on the one hand, and makes it possible to share knowledge about the divine on the other. Similarly, Heidegger suggests that *logos*, having constitutive power, makes things visible, distinguishable, and since it is expressed via language, we can share it. Unfortunately, we forget about the constitutive power of language and focus on the expressive part; accordingly, we use language as if it were a mere instrument without the power of showing and constitution.

In his later writings, Heidegger attempted to give detailed and metaphoric descriptions of language as it relates to *logos* and provides us with some suggestions regarding how the creative potential of language, which had been stripped from its revelatory potential, can be regained. Heidegger wrote in 1938: “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. ... Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest, because it concerns the relation of Being to man” (Heidegger 2007a, 217). Heidegger believes, as this quote suggests, poets and philosophers play a distinguished role in the preservation and restoration of devaluated language. While philosophy¹⁴ attempts to show the work of *aletheia* in its entirety, “the poet’s task would be to give a name to Being in its positivity (as the Holy)” (Richardson 1967, 545). This positivity highlights “unconcealment” in a peculiar way.

The poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed *as* that which conceals itself. In the familiar appearances, the poet calls the alien as that to which the invisible imparts itself in order to remain what it is – unknown.

(Heidegger 2001, 223)

As Heidegger suggests, “[e]mergence into the unconcealed and submergence into concealment dwell primordially everywhere” (Heidegger 1998, 67). For the Greeks, according to Heidegger

concealment determines the character of the presence of man among men. The “concealed” and the “unconcealed” are characters of the very being itself and not characteristics of the noticing or apprehending

activity. Nevertheless, perceiving and saying have indeed for Greeks, too, the basic feature of “truth” or “untruth”.

(Heidegger 1998, 24)¹⁵

That is, since for the Greeks there was no difference between perceiving and saying, the difference between beings and words was not significant. “Unconcealment is, so to speak, the element in which Being and thinking and their belonging together exist. *Aletheia* is named at the beginning of philosophy, but afterward it is not explicitly thought as such by philosophy” (Heidegger 2007b, 445f.). This omission leads to “[t]he incapacity of our way of seeing things that is here coming to light, the inability of our thought to experience the unifying unity in the essence of language” (Heidegger 2007c, 407).

Philosophy and poetry can illuminate the play of concealment and unconcealment. The former is aimed at making the whole process visible, while poetry shows phenomena as they are, and the way it shows this reveals the mysterious, the inaccessible as it is, without the distorting effort which tries to reach and grasp it. This is because poetry “speaks in images”.¹⁶

As we can see, *logos* as it illuminates and makes explicit in words, preserves an intimate relationship with *aletheia*, the ultimate truth. In Heidegger’s description, *aletheia* as concealment and unconcealment can be approached through language as *logos*, which illuminates and creates order and significance, and makes this manifest. Because philosophical investigation went astray almost at its birth, the alterations of these two key concepts have been distorted almost unrecognisably. *Logos* is now related to *aletheia* not as having access to the ultimate truth, but rather as linguistic expressions to truth value.

In the next part I will delineate Bergson’s views on language. Bergson provides us with the main characteristics of language, including its spatial-bound origin, and yields guidance on how to overcome the limits of everyday language. There is a striking similarity with the above-detailed views of Heidegger, and Bergson in particular guides us towards intuition and metaphors instead of relying on the intellect.

Bergson on Language

Although Bergson can be considered as a proponent of vitalism thanks to his conception of *élan vital*, his ideas about the traffic between spirit and matter, and the role intuition plays in his theory, are worth studying against the background of esotericism or mysticism. I will focus on his ideas concerning language. Language, like *logos*, is indispensable but insufficient when we ask about new phenomena, or ask questions bearing

fundamental significance, such as the relation of spirit to matter or the operation of the psyche.

Bergson's esoteric or mystic¹⁷ endeavour is rendered understandable against the background of his effort to provide an alternative to the Western dualist metaphysics. With this new alternative, Bergson's metaphysical framework sheds light on the incompleteness of knowledge conveyed by language. According to him, "metaphysics dates from the day when Zeno of Elea pointed out the inherent contradictions of movement and change, as our intellect represents them" (Bergson, 1946, 15f.). The "intellectual representation of movement and change" leads philosophers to unsolvable anomalies. The main problem, according to Bergson, is that "[w]e install ourselves ordinarily in immobility, where we find a basis for practice, and with it we claim to recompose mobility. We obtain thus only a clumsy imitation, a counterfeit of real movement" (Bergson, 1946, 214). And this is not by chance. Bergson gives a complete list of illusions and delusions induced by language. Bergson asks:

How could this self [human being], which distinguishes external objects so sharply and represents them so easily by means of symbols, withstand the temptation to introduce the same distinction into its own life and to replace the interpretation of its psychic states, their wholly qualitative multiplicity, by a numerical plurality of terms which are distinguished from one another, set side by side, and expresses by means of words?

(Bergson, 2001, 236f.)

The answer is simple. Because material things emerge to us in space, we attempt to grasp our inner life in the same fashion. The dualism of material and spiritual/psychic realities is represented in the same manner by the intellect. Since "the intellect has been made in order to utilize matter, its structure has no doubt been modelled upon that of matter" (Bergson, 1946, 42). That is, humans as material beings live in a material world where they have to manage their life with the help of the intellect. Language is an effective instrument for organisational tasks and also for scientific inquiries. Because material beings are arranged in space and our sensual capacities mediate them according to a spatial order, language is designed in accordance with this spatial arrangement. Let me quote Bergson at length:

We necessarily express ourselves by means of words and usually think in terms of space. That is to say, language requires us to establish between our ideas the same sharp and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects. This assimilation of thought

to things is useful in practical life and necessary in most of the sciences. But it may be asked whether the insurmountable difficulties presented by certain philosophical problems do not arise from our placing side by side in space phenomena which do not occupy space, and whether, by merely getting rid of the clumsy symbols round which we are fighting, we might not bring the fight to an end.

(Bergson, 2001, xix)

This anomaly springs from the difference between our psychic or spiritual life and the way the material, and hence spatial, domain is organised. Bergson offers a perspective from where the unsolvable dualist anomalies can be eliminated. This perspective is *durée* and its perpetual flux, a continuum within which the tension between spatially organised separation and the continuity of psychic life is dissolvable. From this vantage point, humans' perceptual, and thus experiential, life is a kind of stream of continuous change. This "indivisible continuity of change is precisely what constitutes true duration" (Bergson, 1946, 175). This sharply confronts the standard view suggesting "things change". But because the material world is space-bound and language is designed in accordance with this condition, change is considered as the sequence of stable unities.¹⁸ Accordingly, "'immobility' being the prerequisite for our action, we set it up as a reality, we make of it an absolute, and we see in movement something which is superimposed" (Bergson, 1946, 168f.). Furthermore, "our faculties of conception and reasoning" verify the "insufficiency of our faculties of perception" (Bergson, 1946, 154).¹⁹

Bergson suggests a way out from this apparently hopeless situation: we need to listen to our *intuition* instead of our intellect. Intuition can help us because it:

Bears above all upon internal duration. It grasps a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within, the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future. It is the direct vision of the mind by the mind, – nothing intervening, no refraction through the prism, one of whose facets is space and another, language. Instead of states contiguous to states, which become words in juxtaposition to words, we have here the indivisible and therefore substantial continuity of the flow of the inner life.

(Bergson, 1946, 34)

That is, Bergson does not deny that we can speak about the past, present, and future. He suggests that our hardwired nature orients us towards the future, while earlier experiences help us finding the best ways to survive. As perception and action are closely related, movements are designed in

accordance with earlier experiences; therefore, the past is interwoven into the present while targeted at future:

The truth is that there is neither a rigid, immovable substratum nor distinct states passing over it like actors on a stage. There is simply the continuous melody of our inner life, – a melody which is going on and will go on, indivisible, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence. Our personality is precisely that.

(Bergson, 1946, 174f)

But not only are the artificially distinguished time-periods intertwined, so are mind and matter. Though there is no need to explore the minutiae of the Bergsonian reconstruction of how perception and action relate body to mind/matter to spirit; we still have to keep in mind that they are in direct connection.²⁰ As he wrote:

Matter and mind have this in common, that certain superficial agitations of matter are expressed in our minds, superficially, in the form of sensations; and on the other hand, the mind, in order to act upon the body, must descend little by little toward matter and become spatialized. It follows that the intelligence, although turned toward external things, can still be exerted on things internal, provided that it does not claim to plunge too deeply.

(Bergson 1946, 44f)

On the basis of these shifts of perspective, language's distortive potential is quite obvious. Because our words are designed in accordance with spatially organised things, they suggest well-defined and static boundaries, and hence stable qualities. This is in sharp contrast with our psychic life. Our precepts are nascent, hardly isolable, and not fixed; they are changeable:

I abstract this changeableness to give it a name of its own and solidify it in the shape of *taste*. But in reality there are neither identical sensations nor multiple tastes: for sensations and tastes seems to me to be *objects* as soon as I isolate and name them, and in the human soul there are only *processes*.

(Bergson, 2001, 131)

Concepts can be deceptive because they abstract and at the same time generalise. Abstraction may fool us because abstracting certain aspects or qualities may suggest confusing the object's property with being a part of it. It results in the illusion that when we describe something by listing

stabilised qualities, we are inclined to believe we receive an equivalent of the object. This is precisely the situation when processes and continuity are described:

The positions of the mobile are not parts of the movement: they are points of the space which is thought to subtend the movement. This empty and immobile space, simply *conceived*, never *perceived*, has exactly the value of a symbol. By manipulating symbols, how are you going to manufacture reality?

(Bergson, 1946, 214)²¹

On the other hand, generalisation distorts: “The concept can symbolize a particular property only by making it common to an infinity of things. Therefore it always more or less *distorts* this property by the extension it gives to it” (Bergson, 1946, 195f; italics added).²²

Words, not only as concepts but also as tools of social interaction, have impact on our senses. If, for instance, I eat a dish praised as outstanding, its name, filled with accolades, inserts itself between my sensations and consciousness, as Bergson noted (2001, 131). Words, which can provide only a rigid and general description of, for instance, a taste, conceal the variability of personal experience; and, moreover, words often carry connotations that also might influence our sensation.

Bergson extensively describes how intuition can help to overcome the gaps prepared by space-bound intellect: “Intuition, ... signifies first of all consciousness, but immediate consciousness, a vision which is scarcely distinguishable from the object seen, a knowledge which is contact and even *coincidence*” (Bergson, 1946, 35; italics added). Intuition is the spirit’s direct vision by the spirit; accordingly, the distortive potential of space and language has no room. While intellect is specifically intended for the study of parts, we still want to apply it to the understanding of the whole. Further difficulty is posed by intuition since it only manifests through language. Linguistic expressions, such as metaphor, analogy, and various forms of figurative speech can be helpful, even in paradoxical forms. As Bergson put it:

There are cases in which it is imagery in language which knowingly expresses the literal meaning, and abstract language which unconsciously expresses itself figuratively. The moment we reach the spiritual world, the image, if it merely seeks to suggest, may give us the direct vision, while the abstract term, which is spatial in origin and which claims to express, most frequently leaves us in metaphor.

(Bergson 1946, 48)

Therefore, Bergson considers it important to renew the fixed conceptualisation given by reason: instead of exact description, direct insight finds expression through analogies and metaphors – which, over time, can crystallise into terminology; however, by then, it loses the immediacy and distortion-free quality obtained through direct insight.

As we can see, Bergson considers language inescapable, albeit as a deceptive means in the service of reason. He sees an abyss between the material and spiritual as they provide genuinely different pictures of reality. But intuition as the direct vision of the mind by the mind can grasp this difference and express it, though not in a customary way.

The Unavoidable Transcendental

Hermes' heritage, and the Bergsonian and Heideggerian interpretation of language show conspicuous similarities. Intuition and the ever-present interplay of concealment and unconcealment are expressible in language, but never as clearly and formally as logic and reason demand. However, we have a direct relation to them as to *nous* via *logos*, which makes us able to operate in the mundane world and gain direct insight into the ultimate reality/truth. Ultimate reality as *nous*, as the interplay between concealment and unconcealment, and intuition through which *durée* is accessible all belong to a domain which is beyond our everyday mundane experience. Although they are beyond our worldly experiences, these mundane experiences gain meaning and coherence through them. Even if our approach to psyche is mistaken, even if language is deflated and thus mediates a distorted world, and even if we choose not to immerse ourselves in the bowl filled with *nous*, these transcendental powers are operating; we have experiences but no access to ultimate reality.

Subsequently, I will attempt to illuminate how transcendence is necessary even in mundane theoretical frameworks which intentionally are unrelated. First, I will briefly recapitulate how Heidegger incorporated transcendence in the description of *Dasein* as a distinguished being's perception and comprehension of its world; and how Bergson introduced a mediating aspect by which the anomalies entailed by the dualism of matter and spirit can be eliminated.

Immanent Transcendence

“What is *Being* itself? We call this foremost unfolding and grounding question the fundamental question of philosophy,”²³ wrote Heidegger in 1961. As we can see, Heidegger thought Western philosophy is the history of the oblivion of *Being* from early on. It started with *arché*, which concerned the foundations of being entities (*Seiende*), paving the way for

forgetfulness regarding *Being*. Later, in Christian philosophy, the cause and foundation of reality is God. The next decisive step was taken by Descartes, who although acknowledging that man did not create the universe, defined himself as the measure and centre of everything, based on which reality and truth could be determined. That is, *cogito, ergo sum* provided ground for certainty, a secure foundation that allows individuals to vouch for their knowable certainty. From that moment, human beings became a *sub-iectum* which serves as the basis for its constant attributes and changing circumstances. This was a decisive step that distanced us even further from the primordial fact that human beings are thrown into the world, a person is a Being-in-the-world (*Dasein*), and though s/he shares with other beings in her obtaining *Being*, s/he is distinguished because s/he is capable of relating to her own *Being* via her decisions. Because *Dasein* was burdened with the *cogito*, her relation to *Being* became more distanced than ever – according to Heidegger’s reconstruction.

Here it is important to note that despite the fact that Heidegger highlights the Cartesian heritage as decisive in the process of the oblivion of *Being* (*Seinsvergessenheit*), the transcendent power of God in Descartes’ philosophy also plays a crucial role. Transcendence was present in Descartes’ philosophy through the Creator’s omnipotent power as a substance; and his sceptical argument was tailored in accordance with the practice of Jesuit retreat.²⁴

Although Descartes’ philosophy is considered a grounding for modern science establishing nomological structure restricted to the mundane domain, he distinguished three substances: extended, thinking, and God. The extended and thinking substances are created by the divine substance. The metaphysical distinction of extended and thinking substances entails a paradoxical situation when the substances’ relation is in question. Descartes’ solution is to relate them by the divine substance. Extension and the events of cognition are modifications of two different, and in every respect distinct, substances. The connection between ideas and the movements of the body that evoke them is in accordance with God’s will. As in the sixth meditation, Descartes put it: “It is true that God could have so constituted the nature of man as that the same motion in the brain would have informed the mind of something altogether different” (Descartes 2017a, 61). Descartes often describes this connection with the expression “the disposition of nature” (Schmal 2012, 144). That is, God’s sovereignty arranges physical movements and sensations with a specific purpose, thereby creating the psychophysical language necessary for perception; the dualism of body and mind is bridged by the divine substance.

Concerning the Cartesian scepticism,²⁵ first we have to keep in mind that Descartes’s enterprise was aimed at providing the certainty of God’s existence. The necessity of revising all the given beliefs is based on Descartes’s

conviction that the majority of our prejudices form during childhood, when our soul was so closely connected to the body that it assessed the true nature of things based on the impressions the soul received from the body. These childhood misconceptions then become natural and familiar, capturing our credulity. Accordingly, the Cartesian doubt requires considerable effort on the part of the contemplating subject. It is an artificially induced state that exists only as long and to the extent that the subject of contemplation wishes to sustain it. It creates an environment isolated from everyday life experience, and forms an artificial setting in which we must gain insights applicable to real life. However, just as in the carefully controlled conditions of experiments or spiritual exercises, the true nature of things is revealed, the meditations not only mimic but actually generate experiences that, through sufficient practice, become habitual and form the dispositions necessary for the cultivation of the sciences.

The inexhaustible richness of nature and sensory experience play a crucial role in Descartes's conception of physics. The former correlates with the infinite power of God, therefore the human mind is incapable of recognising any limits within it. As he wrote:

The principles that I have so far discovered are so vast and so fertile that their consequences vastly outnumber the entire observed contents of the *visible world*. There are so many of them, indeed, that we could never in a lifetime survey them completely, even in our thought.

(Descartes 2017b, 42, italics added)

These principles, derived by Descartes from the absolute perfections of God, are not hypothetical; instead, they form the solid framework of a science built on secure foundations, although the gaps in the structure must be filled by experience.

For Descartes, the divine substance serves as a bridge between the material and mental realms, and its limitlessness is hardly comprehensible. However, we can observe its effect when the inexhaustible richness of nature, which correlates with the infinite power of God, renders the human mind incapable of recognising its own limits. In contrast, a century later Kant held that “metaphysics is the science of the boundaries of human reason” (Kant, 1900, 113), meaning that divine transcendence is outside of the scope of philosophical inquiry. In brief, with Descartes, epistemology gained ground in the *cogito*; with Kant, metaphysics limited itself to “the boundaries of *human reason*”, and Brucker (more than a quarter century earlier than Kant) suggested that *gnōsis* revolving around divine transcendence should be excluded from academic philosophy. This rough reconstruction of how divine transcendence has gradually been eliminated from academic philosophy shows that the technical term of

“transcendence”, as philosophy more recently understands it, is derived from its earlier meaning attached to the divine, supranatural, and non-mundane sense.

It is clear that Heidegger’s criticism of Descartes is not without ground: the emphasis on the individual will of the ego and the artificial method forced onto the intellect is in opposition to the idea of *Gelassenheit* propagated by Heidegger. But as we can see, humility towards God’s omnipotence is beyond question in Descartes’s case; and his sceptic argument closely relates to certain esoteric practices in the traditional sense, such as the practice of Jesuit retreat.

In Heidegger’s case, God and holiness enter the scene in his later writings. The role that *Being* plays is very similar to that of an omnipotent God. The structure of *Dasein* as Heidegger described it, and its natural relation to its environment as it provides a referential totality which yields the basis of a smooth operational unity, requires something that provides ground for this mutual arrangement and fine-tuned synchronicity. *Being*, as an absolute condition of each being, provides it. However, unlike Descartes, Heidegger found the truth of the visible to be accessible exclusively via not an artificially designed experimental laboratory of the mindset (the Cartesian doubt), but rather through an openness towards nature and the human environment as possible sceneries of the play of concealment and unconcealment.²⁶

Being and man belong together because “Being itself, however, belongs to us; for only with us can Being be present as Being, that is, become present” (Heidegger 1969, 33). Despite this interrelationship, “we stubbornly misunderstand this prevailing *belonging* together of man and Being as long as we represent everything only in categories and mediations, be it with or without dialectic.” If we think in representations, either in terms of *Being* or that of man we can never reach this primordial belonging but merely an “intertwining”. Consequently, we “do not as yet enter the domain of the *belonging* together. How can such an entry come about?” (Heidegger 1969, 32). We can experience this belonging if we abandon representational thinking. To do this, we need a “spring”. As Heidegger formulated

The spring is the abrupt entry into the realm from which man and Being have already reached each other in their active nature, since both are mutually appropriated, extended as a gift, one to the other. Only the entry into the realm of this mutual appropriation determines and defines the experience of thinking.

(Heidegger 1969, 33)

This “spring”, however, is hindered by the customary relation towards beings, and thus, *Being*. The accustomed view is in accordance with the

epoch of metaphysics and technology. Although both can demonstrate our relation to *Being*, we have to first see the mechanisms beyond the occurrences,²⁷ and then carry out a perspective shift. As we can see, late Heidegger is mysterious, but in line with the ancient concept of *nous*.

Bergson also introduces a new frame of reference within which the traditional body-mind relation can be described without any paradoxical gaps. In this case, our focus has to be moved from spatial relations to temporal ones, especially the perpetual flux of nascent phenomena in *durée*. The intimate interplay between spirit and body becomes visible through the spirit's medium, that is, time. The inquiry into the relationship between body and mind is solely a concern for the spirit. Accordingly, a clear understanding accessible to man of how the universe works is attainable only from the perspective of this spirit. This necessitates introducing *durée* against which Bergson attempts to bridge the gap between the material and spiritual. Despite the discrepancy between the spatially tailored language by which we want to describe the operation of spirit and the spirit which is accessible in time, Bergson inserts instances which show the gradual transition from spirit to matter and the other way around. That is, mind is embodied and matter is spiritualised by the operations of both sides – albeit in a mysterious way.

Introducing new terms as a special medium or vantage point by which we can gain insight and true knowledge of the operation of the human universe either entails the inclusion of transcendence or from the start presupposes it. In the case of Bergson, the dualism of spirit and matter is obvious. Suggesting a reliance on intuition, and highlighting *durée*, introduces a third component to be able to relate matter and mind. In the case of Heidegger, *Being* emerges as an immanent transcendence. *Being* serves both as a necessary condition and a supreme potential, allowing humans to be distinguished, as *Dasein* maintains an intimate and reflexive relation to *Being*.

Incompleteness

As we can see, transcendence is explicitly and intentionally present in Descartes's philosophy despite his role in paving the way to evolving a worldview which aimed at grounding worldly phenomena within the world, abandoning transcendence. In Descartes's case, concerning human understanding, the relation between substances of matter and mind is established according to and by the divine substance's will. Bergson's concept of the spirit entails transcendence as far as it is sharply distinguished from the material world. Additionally, for Bergson, the relation of matter and spirit can be explored beyond the domain of the visible physical world, that is, beyond matter-related capacities. This means, if we want to

understand how matter and spirit relate to each other, we have to accommodate ourselves to the field of spirit, meaning we have to leave the realm of the space-bound body, and settle our focus on the *durée*, the perpetual becoming, or to use William James's term, the *stream of consciousness*.²⁸

In the oeuvre of Heidegger, there is a slight modification between *Being and Time* and his later writings. In the latter case, besides *Being*, "the holy" and "God" explicitly enter the scene. In *Sein und Zeit*, *Being* plays a role which is beyond the mundane framework, and establishes the distinguished position of *Dasein*, and creates a common ground for *Dasein* and its world against which the relation to *Being* can become manifest.

Gödel's incompleteness theorem does not entail divine transcendence; however, it illuminates the necessity of reaching beyond the boundaries of a complete system. The theorems are widely, though not universally, interpreted as indicating the impossibility of Hilbert's program to establish a complete and consistent set of axioms for all of mathematics.

The first incompleteness theorem asserts that no consistent system of axioms whose theorems can be systematically listed through an effective procedure (an algorithm) is capable of proving all truths concerning the arithmetic of natural numbers. In any such consistent formal system, there will always exist true statements about natural numbers that cannot be proven within the system. The second incompleteness theorem, an extension of the first, demonstrates that the system cannot establish its own consistency. Though Gödel investigated the limits of provability in formal axiomatic theories, his ideas, especially the second theorem, can be applied in less formal theories, such as philosophical conceptions. I will illuminate a similar situation in philosophy with the help of some considerations by Wittgenstein.

While there is extensive literature on Wittgenstein's criticism of Gödel's incompleteness theorems in the context of his philosophy of mathematics, I will instead consider Wittgenstein's remarks on the nature of language. I will focus on what these conclusions suggest in light of Gödel's second incompleteness theorem. Consequently, my suggestion is in line with the view that Wittgenstein regards Gödel's proof as more than just a mathematical result; he sees it as a fundamental aspect of the humanities (Ohmacht 2003, 271).

It is well known that the *Tractatus* ends with the phrase "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922, § 7). This conclusion is derived from a reconstruction of how we can describe the world in linguistic form. The sequence of propositions outlines a peculiar situation where propositions "*presents* the existence and non-existence of atomic facts" (Ibid. § 4.1); the limits of language define the limits of one's world (Ibid. § 5.6); and the ability to pose a question entails its answer (Ibid. § 6.51). These facts demonstrate, however, that even if all scientific

questions are answered, “the problems of life have still not been touched at all” (Ibid. § 6.52); and there exists the inexpressible, manifesting as the mystical (Ibid. § 6.522). These ideas in the *Tractatus* seem to suggest that language offers a distinctive means to access to the world’s facts as validated by logical and scientific analyses. However, limitations arise since language is inadequate to describe the mystical. The *Tractatus* illuminates that “the problems of life” are not sufficiently explicable in language because they are beyond the scope of logic and scientific analysis.²⁹

In later writings, however, we can find some hints. In *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein calls attention to the hopelessness of the attempt to gain access to mental processes through language. As he wrote: “I have been trying ... to remove the temptation to think that there ‘must be’ what is called a mental process of thinking, hoping, wishing, believing, etc., independent of the process of expressing a thought, a hope, a wish, etc.” (Wittgenstein 1958, 41f). As a guiding principle, he suggested if we find ourselves perplexed about the nature of thought, belief, knowledge, and the like, replace the thought with its expression. However, the “difficulty which lies in this substitution, and at the same time the whole point of it, is this: the expression of belief, thought, etc., is just a sentence; – and the sentence has sense only as a member of a system of language; as one expression within a calculus” (Ibid.).

That is, it is not possible to solve the puzzle: mental processes are in conjunction with language and “language is connected with reality by picturing it, but *that connection cannot be made in language*, explained by language” (Wittgenstein 1980, 12, italics added). Thus we have no access to the states of affairs which are pictured by the sentences of language. “The world we live in is the world of sense-data; but the world we talk about is the world of physical objects” (Wittgenstein 1980, 82). This statement clearly shows the tension between the mental and physical, more precisely, between the physical and the conceptual.

Wittgenstein’s analysis of language clearly demonstrates that while language is effective in daily life, it introduces unsolvable puzzles in philosophy through misleading analogies and grammar, as seen in the “in the mind” confusion. Wittgenstein discusses gaps between rule and its application (Wittgenstein 1979, 90), thought and reality (Wittgenstein 1980, 37), words and meaning (Wittgenstein 1980, 23), and words and things (Wittgenstein 1980, 38), pointing to the need for a meta-language. Nevertheless, this necessity gives rise to an infinite regress.

As we can see, Wittgenstein’s analysis is in line with Gödel’s second incompleteness theorem: philosophical inquires, if they are aimed at providing a comprehensive and consistent picture of the world, need something beyond the world in question and the means by which we describe it is part of this world. When we want to understand mental phenomena or the operation of language as worldly occurrences, we need to reach

beyond it, we have to transcend its limits, otherwise we find ourselves in infinite regress.

Conclusion

Transcendence, in accordance with its Latin origin, means going across, over, transgressing, and passing beyond. Esotericism has been directed towards transcendence from its inception and focuses on its divine character. In relation to philosophy, the meaning of transcendence gradually shifted, losing its supernatural, God-related character. Notwithstanding, transcendence, whether acknowledged intentionally or not, is unavoidable when grappling with questions related to understanding, language, and the systematic description of the accessible world. When addressing “the problems of life” or when a comprehensive explication of experienced phenomena is needed, we must extend beyond the ordinary toolkit of everyday life. Whether introducing new terminology or instances, these serve to demonstrate the necessity of anchoring the whole beyond its boundaries. At this point we can observe that the ineffable character of the ultimate truth/reality, in its pursuit, provides additional evidence for the necessity of transcending the ordinary, mundane domain of experiences. We can see how the Heideggerian *belonging* describes the intimate relation between human beings and *Being* in harmony with the potential for the practitioners’ deification in Hermetic tradition. It is crucial to consciously attempt to regain the primordial relation to *Being* and listen to intuition, providing direct access to the spirit, as exemplified in the immersion in the bowl of *nous*. These parallels suggest that, although recent philosophy articulates itself in new terms and targets mundane phenomena, its relationship to transcendence, in its literary sense, and the effort to express itself appropriately are as crucial as in the case of esotericism. Additionally, as vital questions remain unsolved, they are pushed forward and reformulated. The miracles of life are still miracles; and the relation between the ineffable and the transcendent suggests a welcome return of transcendence to the field of philosophy.

Notes

- 1 The writing of this chapter was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office K-132911.
- 2 (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/esoteric>)
- 3 Although, the definition of esotericism is controversial, in the present chapter I will refer to Hanegraaff’s approach because it allows for tracing the terminological changes that are crucial when seeking hidden entanglements. Additionally, in Hanegraaff’s conception, *gnōsis* plays a distinguished role – and I believe this constitutes common ground in defining esotericism – with a meticulous analysis of its modifications.

- 4 About the difference between Hermeticism and Hermetism see Hanegraaff (2018, 2).
- 5 Hermes Trismegistus's figure is shrouded in mystery. It is beyond question that he was an authority on spiritual and natural inquiries and was associated with Thoth, the ibis-headed god of the moon, wisdom, and administration; the patron of script and ritual performances. According to certain records, we can read about two different, though related, figures of Hermes: some records suggest that the first Hermes was Thoth, who inscribed texts in hieroglyphs, and that the second Hermes, described as the father of Tat and the son of Agathodaimon, later translated them into Greek. From the early Middle Ages through the Renaissance, the so-called Hermetic tradition was built upon the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*. These scriptures have both philosophical and practical relevance. The former, starting with rational philosophy and aimed at achieving supranatural *gnōsis*, laid the groundwork for a tradition in Europe that was interpreted against the backdrop of Christian theology. While the term esotericism has evolved in meaning over time, the core ideas of Hermetism, as presented in Hermetic texts, offer a comprehensive and well-established perspective for investigating the relationship between esotericism and philosophy. The extensive timespan arching from Hermes to Heidegger aptly illustrates the continuous significance of inquiries into worldly phenomena and our comprehension of human existence.
- 6 The papyri were discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi (Upper Egypt). They contain thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices. The papyri comprise 52 treatises, including three works belonging to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and a partial translation/alteration of Plato's *Republic*.
- 7 The Greek original text is unknown. The Latin text as a translation was probably composed between CE 100 and 300 in Alexandria. The earliest record of the Latin version is the use of it by St Augustine for quotation.
- 8 The original title of *Asclepius* was *Logos teleios*, "the perfect discourse". In Latin: "sensu, ratione, intellegentia: sensu, ut te cognoverimus; ratione, ut te suspicionibus indagemus; cognitione, ut te cognoscentes" (Hanegraaff 2022, 234).
- 9 About the detailed description of this process see Hanegraaff 2018.
- 10 Cf. "He [God] filled a great mixing bowl with it [nous] and sent it below, appointing a herald whom he commanded to make the following proclamation to human hearts: 'Immerse yourself in the mixing bowl if your heart has the strength, if it believes you will rise up again to the one who sent the mixing bowl below, if it recognizes the purpose of your coming to be'" (Copenhaver 1992, 15).
- 11 I will return to this point later, when transcendence is in focus.
- 12 About the difference and parallels between Western and Eastern, and Indian and Chinese approaches to paradoxes in their linguistic forms, see Timalsina 2018.
- 13 Heidegger's special vocabulary requires some clarification. He differentiates between *ready at hand* (das Zuhandene) and *present at hand* attitudes. The latter refers to the relation between an observer and the observed, characteristic of scientific and theoretical inquiry. This attitude (called the theoretical attitude or calculating thinking by Heidegger) entails a perspective from where

- a phenomenon seems to be easily analysable and deconstructable with no direct relation to the observer. On the contrary, *present at hand* describes our primordial relation to our ambient world as different things enter the scene as helpful or hindering instruments, like people as companions and mates with whom we have in common experiences and businesses.
- 14 “Nevertheless, the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the *force of the most elemental words* in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from levelling them off to that unintelligibility which functions in turn as a source of pseudo-problems” (Heidegger 1962, 262).
 - 15 This can remind us of the roles *logos* plays in Hermes Trismegistus’s heritage.
 - 16 For details about poetry’s relation to images as such, see Kondor 2008, esp. pp. 95–114.
 - 17 In the literature, we more often encounter references to Bergson as an author whose ideas align closely with mysticism rather than esotericism. However, the terms are hardly demarcatable. About the two terms’ relation see Hammer 2020.
 - 18 “Never is the mobile really in any of these points; the most one can say is that it passes through them. But the passing, which is a movement, has nothing in common with a halt, which is immobility. A movement could not alight on an immobility for it would then coincide with it, which would be contradictory. The points are not *in* the movement as parts, nor even *under* the movement as places of the mobile. They are simply projected by us beneath the movement like so many places where, if it should stop, would be a mobile which by hypothesis does not stop. They are not, therefore, properly speaking, positions, but suppositions, views or mental viewpoints. How, with these points of view, could one construct a thing?” (Bergson, 1946, 212f.)
 - 19 Bergson thinks this situation gave birth to philosophy. And because spatially designed terminology does not refer to, but rather conceals the real nature of our world, rival schools and views are in conflict, with little hope of finding the right terminology because each terminology is established on the same mistaken ground/conception.
 - 20 The intimate relation between matter and spirit can be grasped with the help of *image* as Bergson understood it. *Image* has a twofold nature: it refers to “matter with its modifications, in space”, and, to “unextended sensations in consciousness” (1911, 294). The perceiving body plays a crucial role: it is the centre of perception because it provides perspective and it induces change since “[p]erception’s “true office ... is to prepare actions” (1911, 305). Matter and spirit or consciousness affect each other via minute movements through a virtual domain of past experiences. Bergson often elaborates on how changes in the nervous system are also part of the image, material in nature. Despite its role, for instance, in recalling the past, its material nature allows it to preserve the significance of that moment. *Pure memory*, on the other hand, belongs to the realm of the spirit, specifically through its virtuality: “[M]emory does consist in a regression from the present to the past, but, on the contrary, in a progression from the past to the present... We start from a ‘virtual state’ which we lead onwards, step by step, through a series of different *planes of consciousness*, up to the goal where it is materialized in an actual perception; that is to say, to the point where it becomes present, active state” (Bergson 1991, 239).

- 21 “But as the comparison has brought out a resemblance, and as the resemblance is a property of the object, and as a property seems very much as though it were a *part* of the object possessing it, we are easily persuaded that by juxtaposing concepts to concepts we shall recompose the whole of the object with its parts and obtain from it, so to speak, an intellectual equivalent. We shall in this way think we are forming a faithful representation of duration by lining up the concepts of unity, multiplicity, continuity, finite or infinite divisibility, etc. That is precisely the illusion. And that, also, is the danger” (Bergson, 1946, 195).
- 22 We can think of polymorphic terms (Kondor 2015, 142f.), and the traps analogies entail as in the case of the mind (Wittgenstein, 1979, 114).
- 23 “Was ist das Sein selbst? Diese allererst entfaltende und zu begründende Frage nennen wir die Grund-frage der Philosophie” (Heidegger 1961, 80).
- 24 For a detailed analysis see Schmal (2012, 94–97).
- 25 Descartes’s scepticism was inspired by a promise of a science that offers demonstrative certainty, and was elaborated to avoid circularities. Circularity arises from the fact that the theories targeted at illuminating how perceptual experiences arise, can only be built upon the reliable foundation of sensory experience. Similarly, circularity can be observed in case of institutional authority: the inadequacy of authority justifies rational proof, while the inadequacy of truth needs the intervention of authority. For details see: Schmal (2012, 72–97).
- 26 Cf. “This open between is the openness-for-Being [Da-sein], the word understood in the sense of the ecstatic realm of the revealing and concealing of Being” (Heidegger 1977a, 154).
- 27 “In every phase of metaphysics there has been visible at any particular time a portion of a way that the destining of Being prepares as a path for itself over and beyond whatever is, in sudden epochs of truth” (Heidegger 1977b, 54).
- 28 “Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life*” (James 1918, 239).
- 29 This is reminiscent of Bergson’s endeavour to overcome everyday language as incapable of expressing psychic, spiritual phenomena. Nevertheless, Bergson is amongst the few whose works Wittgenstein read.

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2 Philosophical *Askesis* as an Esoteric-Mystical Exercise

Marina Christodoulou

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the points of convergence between esotericism (also mysticism, spiritualism, etc.) and philosophy. In particular, I will attempt to demonstrate their common origins, or rather, how philosophy's origins lie within esoteric practices and knowledge. I also aim to show how esoteric *rituals* not only were but remain the very rituals through which philosophy operates, despite its strategic and systematic efforts to conceal this fact, especially following the onset of modernity and of its own institutionalisation. These same rituals are evident not only in esoteric practices but also in religion and magic, as well as in madness and especially in neurosis; all of these are incorporated into philosophical practice, despite philosophy's claims of purity and of hegemony over them.¹

I will examine concrete examples of esoteric philosophical rituals and of some philosophers' frank testimonies and confessions, as well as those rituals and elements of philosophy itself which are structurally and systematically hidden and foreclosed.

In order to do this, I will engage in extended definitions and re-definitions of the philosophical practice of *askesis*: this, I will propose, is an esoteric-mystical *askesis*. I will simultaneously examine the "discontents" of "poor" philosophy: of the fasting and lilliputianism, and the hunger and beggary, to which philosophy is reduced when it negates and omits its own esoteric essence. At the same time, I will bring forward the principles or rituals which philosophy and esotericism share as their habits of thought, especially *connection*, *aspiration*, and *questioning*. These principles are more obvious in ancient philosophical practices, which are also practices to which some later philosophers have directly or indirectly confessed.

My general aim is to re-introduce wholeness into philosophical practice, moving away from its omissions of magic, madness, spiritualism, mysticism, occultism and esotericism in general; and to show what the "whole" of philosophy might look like when it accepts and affirms itself

as an esoteric-mystical exercise or *askesis*. Otherwise, it is condemned to suffer a philosophical neuroticism which is mainly its own age-old and ongoing discontent and pathology.

Philosophy and Esotericism: An Equal Demand for Definitions

Esotericism eludes any effort to define it no less than philosophy does, although the latter has nonetheless been granted the status of an autonomous discipline, while esotericism remains “academically homeless” (Hanegraaff 2013, 2). Esotericism and its academic study are two different domains. The nature of esotericism seems to be apparent to its practitioners, although each has their own sense of what it is. As an academic field, the study of esotericism becomes a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary domain that is defined according to the “situated point of view” of the definer – the discipline they come from and the authors they use as *prototypes* of esotericism (Hanegraaff 2013, 3–5). However, more or less the same can be said of philosophy: although it is considered a discipline that stands on its own, definitions of it are elusive, and depend both on which figures are taken into consideration and on the definer’s own traditions, theories, and fields within philosophy. “What is philosophy?” is the most demanding philosophical question, much as “What is esotericism?” is the most demanding question in the academic study of esotericism.

In the case of esotericism, neighbouring concepts, terms or domains also get in the way, such as mysticism, spiritualism, occultism, hermeticism, Theosophy, Gnosticism, astrology, alchemy, magic, and others. This makes the search for a definition even more demanding. But this too can be said of philosophy, since its close interactions with other disciplines, both historical and systematic, can impede and blur definitions.

According to Magee, esotericism is:

the word increasingly used today to designate currents of thought formerly referred to as “occultism” or as “the occult sciences” (terms that came into wide usage in the nineteenth century). These currents have a long history in the West, sometimes hidden and subterranean (as the word “occultism” implies) – at other times, in the Renaissance for example, as part of mainstream thought. Esoteric doctrines, schools, or practices include alchemy, astrology, magic, Kabbalism, Renaissance Hermeticism, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, number symbolism, sacred geometry, Christian theosophy, spiritualism, mesmerism, and much else.

(Magee 2016, xiii)

As in occultism and esotericism, the mysterious – the secretive, the hidden and the silent – seems to be the essential feature of mysticism: “the mystical has always been ‘hidden’ – if only in the sense that it is difficult for most to access” (Magee 2016, xv). However, esotericism is a “constructed” category, originating in the “genealogy of wisdom” sought by scholars of the Renaissance (Magee 2016, xviii–xix). As Magee notes:

This hugely influential “ancient wisdom narrative,” as Hanegraaff refers to it, was in effect the first modern attempt at a history of philosophy. ... Protestant German theologians went on the attack against [it, leaving] a kind of “wastebasket” of rejected knowledge Quite without intending to, these historians had created the category of what we call today “esotericism.” From then on, these esoteric figures and movements – though they often had little in common – would be seen as all somehow belonging with one another in a “counter tradition.” ... Hanegraaff has [shown how] different esoteric currents came to be understood as all belonging together under one rubric. On the other hand, he also argues that our modern conceptions of “real” science and “real” philosophy were formed in opposition to this discarded “other” – which was itself a construction of modern science and philosophy!
(Magee 2016, xix–xx; referring to Hanegraaff 2009)

Esotericism encompasses different currents, and according to some scholars one should look into its component parts for corresponding definitions instead of trying to locate the essential characteristics of esotericism in general (Magee 2016, xviii).

According to others, one should look into the nature or essence of esotericism in order to define and distinguish it by identifying certain characteristics or criteria. For example, Antoine Faivre lists four “intrinsic” characteristics of esotericism (*correspondences; living nature; imagination or mediations; transmutation*) and two non-intrinsic ones (*transmission and concordance*) (see Faivre 1992, xv–xx; Faivre 1994, 10–15; Hanegraaff 2013, 3). All these can also be seen as endo- and exo-characteristics of other disciplines (and of what makes a discipline), but even more so of philosophy. Philosophy is distinguished by *imagination*, by how its ideas *correspond* to signs in the world, and by a kind of *transmutation* too, since philosophy aims at changing something in the world or at changing reality, not like esotericism but more indirectly. As Magee writes,

much of esotericism ... is concerned with changing reality: gaining knowledge or powers that might enable us to alter or control objects,

situations, and events, either for selfish or selfless purposes. Magic, alchemy, astrology, and all other forms of divination are obvious examples.

(Magee 2016, xxxii)

Mysticism, on the other hand, is not concerned with changing reality but with experiencing reality and truth in an alternative and more profound way.

Concordance and *transmission* are also what bring completely different traditions, theories, and authors together under the umbrella of philosophy.

What, then, distinguishes the main areas of mysticism and esotericism? According to Gershom Scholem:

Mysticism means a kind of knowledge which is by its very nature incommunicable. It cannot be directly transmitted; it can be made visible only indirectly, because its substance cannot be expressed in human language. Esoteric knowledge, on the other hand, means a kind of knowledge that may be communicable and might be communicated but whose communication is forbidden.

(Scholem 1964, 3–4; cf. Magee 2016, xvi)

A further distinction between mysticism and esotericism, according to Magee, is that “mysticism is gnosis; esotericism is *technē* (technique or art)”. As he continues:

This *technē* is founded on *gnosis*. However, it would be highly misleading to gloss this as “mysticism is theory, esotericism is practice.” ... The mystical worldview is the product of *gnosis*, and it is the deep assumption that is brought to esoteric practices of all sorts, not derived from them. Esotericism is founded on mysticism (i.e., esoteric *technē* is founded on mystical *gnosis*), not the other way around. Magic provides us with yet another example.

(Magee 2016, xxx; cf. Versluis 2007)

In this chapter I will approach where esotericism, as a practice or way of thinking and being, and not so much as an academic field, meets philosophy – again, as a way of thinking and being, and not as it is practised within academic boundaries.

Philosophical *Askesis*

Philosophy is less like a road that leads one to a predetermined destination, or a stable topos of *decision*, and more like a trickster who proposes,

teases, humourises, terrorises, and disturbs. Philosophy should be understood as a movement and as an activity, and as a kind of thinking that we do in motion, rather than as a path, a method or *mētis* that leads *towards* the place where one has *decided* to arrive, or the topos of “final” *decision*. Philosophy is thought-in-motion that jumps from one idea or theory to another in order to taste (*sapio*) another conceptual plane of thought. The philosophical essay, as much as philosophy in general, is an *attempt* (*essayer*) at thinking – at once *asketic* (from *askesis*, rather than *ascetic*), *curious*, *honest*, *hopeful*, and both *wander-ful* (exploratively tasting the possibilities of ideas; see Christodoulou 2022b) and *wonder-ful* (non-contemptuous). This is what philosophy should be: *anarchic* in its essence and praxis, instead of becoming a discipline of *ascetism* and contempt (*mépris*).

My proposal is that engaging (*essaying*) in philosophy involves deliberately *distancing* oneself from *interpretation*: an act of distancing (*ephexis*) as Friedrich Nietzsche understood it. This approach, which I call “*essaying-in-philosophy*” (Christodoulou 2022b), entails suspending one’s reflexes, impulses, and tendency to arrive at a philosophical *decision*, as François Laruelle puts it. It also challenges the assumption that philosophy alone is *sufficient*, and emphasises the need for openness (a lack of *resistance*; Laruelle calls for the least resistance possible in his “non-standard philosophy”) to the possibility that philosophy can reveal the One or the Real (*le Réel*).

The content of philosophy can be defined as a disruption of mental habits and the introduction of new forms and ways or methods of thinking. For that reason, *curiosity* plays a major role in the philosophical *askesis*, as Michel Foucault observes:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. ... There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it, or when it works up a case against them in the language of naive positivity. ... The “essay” – which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication – is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is what it was in times past, i.e., an “*ascesis*,” *askesis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.

(Foucault 1984/1990, 8–9)

Another philosopher who reveals the importance of *askesis*, especially in ancient philosophy, is Pierre Hadot. For ancient philosophers, philosophy was mostly a living philosophy, or a philosophy *of, in, and for* life: a philosophy of praxis and a praxis of philosophy, or a (spiritual) exercise (*askesis*). Philosophy was an act of transforming oneself as well as one's *theory*, or view or vision, of the world or cosmos. To think differently was to live differently: in other words, new *forms-of-thought* led to new *forms-of-life* (cf. Hadot 1990, Hadot 1995a, and Hadot 2008). The formal elements of these philosophers' methods can be listed or analysed (at least according to Philo of Alexandria's Stoico-Platonic list) as "research (*zētēsis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnōsis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosochē*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things" (Hadot 1995b, 84).²

I think that François Laruelle's path of the *least philosophical resistance* incorporates these elements, provided that they are not employed in order to perpetuate, reinforce or re-affirm the deceptive "philosophical sufficiency", philosophy's claim and illusion of self-sufficiency.

The *Pascha* of Philosophy: Against Philosophical Fasting and Lilliputianism ...

... and towards a trans- and a post- and a non-philosophising: I am strongly for what I would call a trans-philosophy, or a post-philosophy: a critical posture towards philosophy, but one which does not erase it. This is a philosophy, or a philosophical practice, for, about, and (informed, respecting, originating) from all living beings, including ourselves as living beings, and not simply as the limited "existing" beings of Descartes' famous "I think, therefore I exist". That is, towards a philosophy which, borrowing from non-philosophy's "democracy of all thought", is not only democratic towards all theories, but also towards all beings as the agents of "theory". Each is capable of theory in different senses of *theorein*: of viewing, listening, tasting, smelling, touching, feeling, sensing, perceiving, locating, experiencing the(ir) worlds and themselves in the world – of all types of what Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana (in their theory of autopoiesis) call "cognition", a cognition which is not limited to consciousness, or to any of the "higher" forms that are usually attributed solely to humans.

In the tradition starting with Descartes, thought and existence are understood to be separable. It becomes obvious that thought comes first, and *then* existence; but what follows thought is therefore a mere *existence*, separated from thought. Paradoxically, for Descartes thought is more important than this mere existence, even though without existence there can be no thought, but it is also obvious that *if* and *when* thought comes

first, *therefore* it is followed by a mere *existence*. This mere existence itself becomes conceptually separated: *mere* (and) *existence*. With *existence* the constituent elements of one's *being*, and even more so of *living*, have been demolished by the ranking and hierarchy that are inherent to philosophising. As Aaron Schuster indicates, this eliminates "one's usual habits and inclinations, one's sedimented opinions and beliefs; the thinker must have the capacity to submit even the most seemingly obvious perceptions to radical questioning". This inherent hierarchy within philosophical practice "contravenes the 'pleasure principle,' and the mind always risks slipping back to its more comfortable ways" (Schuster 2017, 189; see also Schuster 2024).

The contravention of the "pleasure principle", however seriously it negates one's *being* in general, might less strongly negate one's *living*, one's most deeply essential or vital *being*. In the case of *living*, of (one's) *life*, the contravention of the "pleasure principle" is equal, as Schuster writes, to a "tarrying with death": it threatens one's "physical constitution", "the spontaneous thrust of [one's] instincts, which demand first and foremost that [one] sustain [one's] life, that is, to eat" (Schuster 2017, 189). Such a conception of philosophising is almost like religious *asceticism* or *fasting*, where thought, in its most austere, sterile and systematic form, becomes an *epochē*: not a disembodied, idealistic one, but an *epochē* with vitalistic repercussions. It becomes what Schuster calls "an alimentary *epochē*" that suspends the instinct for self-preservation and reduces the natural claims and evidence of the body" (ibid., 189). Like the religious fathers, Descartes, the intellectual father of western philosophy after him, aimed "to determine if there is some hard kernel of the body that cannot be starved away" (ibid., 189). There is *not*, however, and this started to become very obvious in postmodern philosophy, after some centuries of starving the *living* away to leave only *being*, and starving this *being* towards a thin *existence*.³

Descartes' initiation of modern thought represents a leap, almost a magical one, from hyperbolic doubt and uncertainty to an equally hyperbolic certainty which does not sound *rational* at all (could the mediation of the rational *method* he proclaims make it so?), despite its proudly programmatic claims to be such. It sounds more like a delusion of a schizophrenic mind, operating on a monoscopic, mono-rationalistic basis: a disembodied, idealistic *epochē*, where the subject *epechei* from all vitalism, all its *élan vital* having been swallowed up by what Bergson calls "intelligence". (He means this type of rationalism, not "ingeniousness".)⁴ Peter Sloterdijk puts it differently: "The ethical dilemma of the modern consists in the fact they think like vegetarians and live like carnivores" (Sloterdijk and Heinrich 2011, 130). This dilemma, between a carnivorous *élan vital* and fasting, ascetic, vegetarian thought, has become a great divide and *lapsus*.

I am writing here purely from the perspective of a philosopher, and in this stance, according to my own perception of philosophy, one forms hypotheses and propositions, and thinks as an *askesis* (*essayist*), not in the form of *scientia*. This means that philosophical thinking, if it is to be placed in a strictly pragmatic position, serves as a starting point for other fields' reflections, and as a point from which views and hypotheses may be shaken and ruptured. The primary form of truth and accuracy in philosophy, or even its only systematicity, is, or should be, its *honesty*, equivalent to that of the child or the fool (cf. Beauvoir 1954, 262).

This is my stance towards philosophy – that is, towards a more essayistic philosophy or philosophical style. Other philosophers can have other stances, and this too is part of the *essayistic* character of philosophy. Philosophy should be reserved for absolutely free thought, without any constraints; such constraints can be applied later on, when thoughts or ponderings from philosophy enter the “membrane” of other fields, where an “immunological” *elenchus* can readily be made.⁵

The Hunger and Beggary of Poor Philosophy

Jacques Bouveresse, whose critical position lies either between or beyond continental and analytic philosophy, is among many who diagnose another eating disorder in philosophy, that of *autophagy*. Within philosophy, its two principal styles try to consume one another, each pronouncing its opposite to be inadequately philosophical: the essayistic or literary style on the one hand, and the systematic on the other. The latter, with *pretensions* to scientism, attacks the former as unscientific and unargumentative; while the essayistic style accuses the systematic of falling short of a new (conceptual) plane or form-of-intellectual-life. The systematic style pretends to have arrived there through scientific orthodoxy, but in reality, it has arrived only at a form of zombified semi-life (Bouveresse 1984, 171–72).

There may in fact be no scientific method, as Paul Feyerabend, to whom Bouveresse refers extensively, tried to show through his epistemological anarchism (Feyerabend 1975). According to Spengler, scientific questions are merely “questions of style” (see Bouveresse 1984, 65). As John Dewey writes in a similar vein, and in close proximity to François Laruelle:

There is no kind of inquiry which has a monopoly of the honorable title of knowledge. ... As philosophy framed upon the pattern of experimental inquiry does away with all wholesale skepticism, so it eliminates all invidious monopolies of the idea of science. By their fruits we shall know them. The marking off of certain conclusions as alone truly science, whether mathematical or physical, is an historical

incident. It sprang originally from *man's desire for a certainty and peace* which he could not attain practically in the absence of the arts of management and direction of natural conditions. ... All the eulogistic connotations that gather about "truth" were called into play. Thus "science," meaning physical knowledge, became a kind of sanctuary. A religious atmosphere, not to say an idolatrous one, was created. "Science" was set apart its findings were supposed to have a privileged relation to the real.

(Dewey 1929, 220–221. From the chapter "The Naturalization of Intelligence". Emphasis in italics is mine)

There are also the corresponding hungers, beggaries, and sexual fasts in philosophy. Systematic and even more so analytic philosophy, or rather institutionalised philosophy, is comparable to the ancient Greek wife, while assayistic philosophy is like the *hetera*. In both cases, philosophy becomes a metonym for "woman", and accordingly the life of philosophy corresponds to the life of a woman, which can proceed in roughly two ways: the systematic way and the assayistic or aphoristic way. In both cases, her life depends on *seduction*. Seduction has several methods: it can take the form of *persuasion* and *conviction*, or, more abruptly and directly, of *aphorism* – rupture, awe, and wonder. The first is slow, submissive, tricky, sly, "serpenty" – the method of Eve, the good wife, the perpetuator and keeper of the tradition: of family, the state and the religion, or simply of patriarchy. The second, I think, is rebellious, honest and friendly towards desire. The latter is the method of *heterai*, who were not *pornai*, but seduced with their bodies as well as their spirit, and were the respected initiators of philosophical discussions, cultural reformations and political decisions. These *heterai* were depositors and keepers of an older tradition in which women were powerful and, according to some theories, even the initiators of the Symbolic and of Culture.⁶ There is a documented anthropological-ritual-mystical power in the nakedness of women,⁷ which in the ancient Greek civilisation survived with the practice – or rather the tactic, survived and identified within patriarchy with the mere *word* – of *anasyrma*, and also through the myth of Baubo. This practice or ritual, in which women exhibit their naked bodies, especially their vulvas, intimidates and scares men: it was even said to frighten away enemies, or used to revolt against regulations. In order to exorcise and oppress this power, patriarchy vulgarises, mocks and pornographises it, and makes it habitual. The same applies to the power of hunger: any hunger, lust, breathing, and desire in general, or even more fundamentally the *addiction to life* (see Christodoulou 2022a). Capitalism provides plenty to clog all these cravings and addictive *invaginations*.

Beggary for Non-decision: Philosophy as an Esoteric Practice

The philosophical *askesis* is a spiritual and mystical experience or exercise, and among philosophy's influences and origins this is its first close historical association with ancient esotericism (meant here to include mysticism and spiritualism), and more concretely with ancient Greek shamanism.⁸ Such esoteric or spiritual and mystical experiences are a result of rituals (dancing, singing, and many other acts) and psychedelics (psychedelics as all psychedelic-psychotropic and "altered state of consciousness" experiences, such as substances, states, activities, and rituals); the physiological effects of both are examined in contemporary neuroscience. It is a matter of interpretation and preference whether the god one finds through these processes is external (a transcendently metaphysical super-being) or internal (the depths of immanence).

Jerome A. Stone in his article "Spirituality for Naturalists" (2012)⁹ examines the philosophical literature on what 11 philosophers understand as naturalised spirituality, or the experience of the mystical and the transcendental, without its classical attribution to the divine. Stone identifies three principles of spirituality (*connection, aspiration, questioning*), which seem to me to be likewise the pillars of philosophicality, of the philosophical experience, or of the philosophical *askesis*. Again, it is a matter of preference or interpretation whether one considers their underlying principle to be immanent, ontological, transcendental, or of some other kind:

This survey of the literature indicates that there is a great deal of current interest in spirituality without God or a metaphysical transcendent. These recent advocates of natural spirituality are saying three things about spirituality: We are spiritual, first, when our sense of connection is enlarged. Second, we are spiritual when we aspire to greater things, when we attempt to realize our ideals. Finally, we are spiritual when we ask the big questions. Note that these three – connection, aspiration, and reflection on profound questions – are all forms of enlarging our selves, of breaking through the narrow walls of the ego.

(Stone 2012, 492)

The three principles of spirituality, then, are enlarged *connection, aspiration* to realise ideals, and *questioning*, or asking the big questions or aporias. In the case of the enlarged *connection*, what is quieted is the embodied self: the sense of being an embodied, "intentional", experiencing subject; the autobiographical self-narratives; and the very sense of a (or the) self. These functional and constructed illusions, or biases and assumptions, provide *immunological* insurance through self-*circumscription* and naturalism's

autopoietic unit of the human, or of any other highly *cognitive* ontological unit or organism.¹⁰

Questioning, *connection*, and an *aspiration* to realise ideals: are these not the three principles of philosophicality as well? Even so, philosophy is an *askesis* that is usually performed without the direct influence of endorphins – endo-chemicals secreted through rituals involving the body in extreme conditions – or of exo-orphins – psychedelics. Thus, the philosopher has room (and the task or the responsibility) for *epoché* or *ephexis* (cf. Christodoulou 2022b, 2022c): that is, to keep a reflective distance, suspending or withdrawing from direct representations of experience or phenomenological “intentionality” any compulsive judgement or *decision* (as François Laruelle uses the term: the obsessive-compulsive drive of philosophers and their theories to arrive at a philosophical *decision*). As a result, immanent experiences have been stripped away from feelings of awe, wonder, and the mystical, and the same emotions are instead attributed to a transcendental principle or being. This attribution operates through the interference of a *privileged distance*, full of rationalistic, sublimating and otherwise defensive tools and methods. This defence is both psychological and, in the deeper sense, *immunological*.

In other words, since philosophers are not compelled by the reflexive directness of their experiences, and are not under the influence of intense endorphins or exo-orphins, they have room to think *within* this space: to reflect on how to justify or ground the emotions of awe and the mystical. As a result of this justification, or philosophical *decisioning*, philosophy through the ages has been immersed in and populated with religious principles that justify *connection*, *aspiration*, and *questioning*, as well as the mystical emotions, by attributing them to a transcendental exo-unit. There have, of course, always been philosophers who expounded naturalism and (in the broader sense) materialism, but since modernity, there has been a turn from religiosity towards filling the reflective space with a materialism that appears in the form of industrial and capitalistic ideals. Perhaps this reflects the infiltration of Protestant ideas, or ideals: the idealisation of work, labour, individualism, careerism, professionalism, and so on, all of which are, more or less, an ascetic self-punishment for the ontological daring of embodied existence. This results in the institutionalisation of philosophy, or in a further, more systematic, (phantom methodology of) philosophy, where *connection* becomes public connections, namely professional, LinkedIn-type connections and public relations; *aspiration* becomes career ambition and vanity; and *asking big questions* becomes a fabricated mono-questioning or *apories fixes*.

Therefore, *asking questions* becomes, within this framework, a secondary attribute,¹¹ sometimes a fabricated one, or an automatic and plas-matic one: a mere means (if even that) of pursuing the *connection* and the

aspiration attributes, instead of being their equal and an end in itself of philosophising and philosophicality. This disturbance in the balance of the three principles of the philosophical experience both effects and infects what we think of today as the philosophical quintessence: *questioning*, or rather, the answering of questions. Once more, the emphasis on answering, rather than on *questioning*, is to be interpreted within the context of Protestant ascetic ideals, as well as within Catholic, but also *catholic*, puritanism (both, potentially, to be traced and reduced to neuroticism). If one exercises the principle of *questioning* while leaving it detached from those of *connecting* and *aspiring* – in their original senses, and not their institutionalised, disturbed ones – then one is *not* doing philosophy or questioning philosophically, but there is a new discourse, or rather *discipline*, at hand. The same applies to contemporary mysticism and spiritualism, where the principles are also disturbed, and usually *connecting* is solely emphasised – and thus we have a new discourse emerging. In philosophising the practice of *questioning–connecting–inspiring* has to be done in a more “manual” way, which creates risks.

John Ó Maoilearca (2023) notes another connection between mysticism and philosophy, suggesting that the Bergson siblings (Henri and Moina) might have aimed at the same Truth but in different ways: Henri through philosophy (a “philosophy of mysticism”, as Ó Maoilearca calls it), and Moina through mysticism (a “mysticism of philosophy”). In other words, as Ó Maoilearca (2023) also argues, the heterogeneous thought of the Bergson siblings is an example of what Laruelle calls “the democracy of all thought”. This *all* can include mysticism as well. There are many other points of convergence between the Bergsons and Laruelle, notably the influence of French spiritualism, especially Félix Ravaisson’s, on both Henri Bergson and François Laruelle. Another is Moina Bergson’s saying: “There is too much tendency to wish all to follow the Ideal of one – we are apt to forget that the Ideal of each will lead to the same Truth” (Bergson/Mathers, 2021). To grasp what Laruelle calls “the democracy of all thought”, one should not understand that “unlike the Neoplatonist’s One, the non-philosophical One is not ineffable, but rather infinitely effable. It provides the basis for an infinite number of names for itself” (Smith 2012, 21; see also Ó Maoilearca 2015; Cull Ó Maoilearca 2017). This democracy of thought, or the infinite effability of the One or the Truth, is not far from Schelling’s affirmation, in the *Deities of Samothrace*, that the hidden, secret meaning of all mysteries and secret doctrines is the “doctrine of the unity of god” (Schelling 1815/1977, 24–25, cf. 16, 63, n.25) and thus that the “public cult”, or the exoteric (or *akroamatic*) discourses and mysteries, although phenomenally contradictory, point to the same doctrine as the esoteric, mystical or secret ones (ibid., 25).

As Walter Kaufmann notes, Hegel too, in 1802's "Introduction" to the *Critical Journal of Philosophy*, which he edited with Schelling, writes that philosophy is and should be esoteric; although later, in 1807, he says the opposite. In Hegel's words:

Philosophy is by its nature something esoteric, neither made for the mob nor capable of being prepared for the mob. It is philosophy only by being altogether opposed to the understanding, and thus even more to healthy common sense, which means the geographical and temporary limitations of a group of men. Compared with this, the world of philosophy is an inverted [*verkehrt* might also be translated as topsy-turvy] world.

(Kaufmann 1965/1978, 56)¹²

Such associations of esoteric thought with philosophy, or influences of esotericism on philosophy, can be found in the work of numerous philosophers, perhaps nearly all, if one takes a closer look both at their texts, including intertextual references, and at the contexts which their works or their lives have unveiled. Schelling, Leibniz, Michel Foucault, and Luce Irigaray are just a few examples. Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) are examples of esoteric thinkers whose influence on other philosophers, especially the German Idealists, was immense. According to Hegel, Jacob Boehme was the first German philosopher (Muratori, 2016). Perennial Philosophy (*philosophia perennis*) is the best-known umbrella term for philosophies that share with esoteric doctrines the conviction that there is only *one* truth.

Driven by his belief that there can only be one truth, Leibniz aimed to demonstrate that the "inner Light" of "true mysticism" is compatible with philosophers' rational knowledge. Susanne Edel (2018, 75–95) argues that the outcome of Leibniz's involvement with mysticism was his work "True Mystical Theology", which is a rendition of his ideas about monads using mystical terms (see also Mayer 1999; Benz 1968/1983; Horn 1997). According to Edel, Leibniz positioned his own doctrine of individual substances (*Monadology*) within the framework of *philosophia perennis*, and he believed that "true" mysticism was part of this same tradition. He engaged in a conversation with André Morell, a follower of Boehme, and he categorised Boehme's ideas among those belonging to a lineage of "true mysticism" that could be evaluated against reason.

According to Luce Irigaray, desire is the bridge between the physical and the spiritual part of the human, as well as the path between two humans. This desire is not for repetition in the form of a return to the womb or to the moment of conception, but for repetition as *proximity*: for being with another human being, who repeats anew the event of my conception.

Otto Rank (1924/2010) says the same thing in *The Trauma of Birth*.) However, humans become neurotic within their fabricated culture, putting their energy into going around in circles; thus this repetition indeed becomes a repetition-compulsion for a return to the womb. This, as Otto Rank posits, is the *sine qua non* of neuroticism. Why? Because there is no way for that circling energy to escape the cycle and be expended on movement towards *self-affection* (an Irigarayan term) or towards another human being (Heidegger's *Mitsein*) – towards the *dwelling* of the self and the other, and thus the living being, or life itself. The *breath* (to which Irigaray refers often) is exhausting: breath exhausts the body and it is exhausted itself inside the body, leading to asphyxiation. *Autonomous breath*, taken into the matter of the body, is the event that signals giving birth to oneself (as Irigaray formulates it), both physically (biologically) and spiritually (symbolically), (because Symbolism simply [semantically] follows [the signs of] Biology).

Self-affection (according to Irigaray) starts with one's own *dwelling*, which is grounded on *desire*, and thus on the Aristotelian natural reserve of energy that disposes one to develop (*entelecheia*, *phuein*); one will grow towards the other too, as trees do when extending their branches and their roots, communicating with the whole of the forest. For Irigaray, Desire is both “natural energy” and “spiritual energy”. It is what transforms one's materiality into spirituality. If desire takes into account *difference*, it is spiritual from the beginning. Spirituality means cultivating not just the instinctual or impulsive, but also a relation with the transcendence of the other – transcendence in its cultural meaning. It is a way of overcoming the scission or divide between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. To practise natural care is to take charge of one's life, to let the “natural energy” (what I have called in my previous work “addiction” (Christodoulou 2022a)) transform and grow; otherwise that energy moves in circles and becomes obsessive. We do not grow like plants, and thus desire can help us to continue to grow as humans, by relating to one another. You grow by *returning* to the concept of nature.¹³

Foucault had similar intuitions regarding the connection between esotericism and philosophy, writing in the *History of Sexuality* that only esoteric knowledge can hold the key to the complexity and plurality of meaning. This brings Schelling's views to mind:

Meaning created links so numerous, so rich and involved that only esoteric knowledge could possibly have the necessary key. Objects became so weighed down with attributes, connections and associations that they lost their own original face. Meaning was no longer read in an immediate perception, and accordingly objects ceased to speak directly: between the knowledge that animated the figures of objects and the

forms they were transformed into, a divide began to appear, opening the way for a symbolism more often associated with the world of dreams. (Foucault 1961/2006, 17)

Éric Weil, as I read him, sees a *violence* in discursive differences and the variety or *pluralism* of discourses, as all discourses are responses to violence. I deduce that violence exists in their plurality as well – and Weil searches for a unified and universal discourse (one *cosmos*, I would say) that is the One.¹⁴ That same One (*cosmos*), Schelling argued, is the “philosophical stone” which both exoteric practices (public philosophical, scientific, and religious discourses) and esoteric ones (mystical, requiring initiation) have sought. It is the one monotheism, as well as what Laruelle seeks with the *democracy of all thought*, and approximately the *resistance to philosophical decidability*: an admission (or even a “permission”) that there is a nature, or rather a *phusis*, which resists (to) us. This accords with Éric Weil’s claims as well, letting us avoid the *violence* of the discursive difference and pluralism of views.

Why are such direct references to esoteric thought within philosophy, both implicit and explicit, hidden or omitted? Perhaps because of the non-systematic and especially the non-academic, (non-consensual) style of such writing and thinking: we are afraid that the style of such prose creates a bulletproof shell around statements, propositions and “truths”, as it does in esoteric discourses, and in poetry *par excellence*.¹⁵ What we are actually afraid of is that any prose with a non-typified style is *non-falsifiable*: that as an academic, scientific, or systematic style it escapes the argumentative process of counter-argumentation and falsification. This is why we falsify *in advance* the whole of the non-typified, non-consensually agreed “style” of an *oeuvre*, which we are even afraid of calling an *oeuvre*, because an *oeuvre* presupposes an *auteur*, or is the *object* that makes the *auteur*.

In systematised disciplines (science, philosophy), the whole point is to reject the *auteur*, because, as the word’s etymology indicates, the *auteur* “augments” realities, and systematised disciplines are what they are by virtue of having established a consensus about a common reality. Disciplines that aim to produce techniques do study a pre-established reality; science has to have a ground on which its researches and statements can function as technologies. But this is not so in the case of philosophy, the primary function of which, like that of esoteric discourses, is to augment realities; and this is also part of its esoteric principle of *aspiration*.

In the case, for instance, of “life” as an object of examination, interrogation, or thinking, philosophy is closer to anthropology or ethnography, and even more so to esotericism. The aim is to examine the *vecu* rather than the *vivant*, which, latter, is the object of the more “exact” sciences, such as biology. I perceive philosophy as a form of anthropology

or ethnography, limited to or focusing on the *individual* rather than the *collective*, or as an auto-anthropology, auto-ethnography, or, even, auto-phenomenography (see Lykke 2022); and I perceive anthropology as a pluralistic philosophy, or as philosophies in the plural, and as a philosophy *with* (scientific) evidence.

In its links to esotericism, philosophy has many more points of convergence at both the individual and the collective levels, especially regarding *rituals*. It is always the subject that thinks, speaks, and writes; it is a *situated* voice, a *doxa*, akin to the *doxae* examined in anthropology and ethnography, and even more so in esoteric discourses: the perspectives of different people and peoples. Anthropology presents them as such, treating such speech as unfalsifiable. This is not so far from how science and philosophy proceed, but these disciplines lack the honesty to admit the subjectivity of their auteurs, or of the bare voice, which they conceal with various shells, shelters, the very meticulously constructed methodologies and other protective layers.

Regarding this matter, I find the sophists to be more admirable than the philosophers.¹⁶ What distinguishes sophists from philosophers, and maybe even sages? What led to the ultimate triumph of philosophers? Was there a political or technical-methodological rationale, and hence a political purpose, behind that triumph? Indeed there was. The sophists were incompatible with the political beliefs of the *grand-métis*, and with the organised or obsessive-compulsive habits inherited from the Neolithic era, which had deprived mankind of its ceremonial, “*moirasmatic*” (distributive) proto-culture.

Humans within the patriarchal system lack the necessary knowledge and skills to develop their capacity for *empathy*,¹⁷ their ability to understand and share the suffering of others. Additionally, they frequently suppress, repress, or transform their own emotions using commonly designated psychological mechanisms. Art makes possible a gradual exploration of one’s own psychological and cognitive abilities, facilitated by the artist’s unique methods and techniques. These methods are not accessible to the audience, who may lack the knowledge or inclination to utilise them independently. Therefore, individuals can experience and appreciate the artwork when they allow the artist to guide them through the “suspension of disbelief”, but on their own they may be uninformed, ignorant, or unwilling to engage in this process. In essence, art is not a mystical phenomenon, just as psychedelics are not. The perceived mysticism of aesthetic encounters lies in the fact that both art and psychedelics provide a guided pathway to certain psychological and cognitive experiences. Individuals, since these experiences are readily provided to them, are unable to replicate or imitate them in their everyday lives. Art may imitate reality, but in our current system and our current culture, reality cannot imitate art. Our real-life

processes fall short of replicating *allo*-directed artistic processes to form an *auto*-directed artistic experience.

This is one of patriarchy's significant thefts: it appropriates the esoteric, spiritual, mystical, and magical elements that were once equally distributed among community members, particularly through rituals, and reserves them as privileges for artists or other labourers in scientific, psycho-cognitive, anthropological, and philosophical discourses. Those same rituals were once shared or allocated (see the Greek term *moirao* [μοιράω / μοιρῶ]) in an egalitarian way to every member of the community. The shaman used to be a knowledge labourer; shamans shared the knowledge they had received, distributing it among their fellow people. This made knowledge transparent. Rituals were used to educate the people and involve them in acquiring knowledge. In the present patriarchal system, the patriarchal "shamans", such as artists, scientists, philosophers, and politicians, accumulate and archive their knowledge. They strategically withhold it from the people, except in certain instances where it is presented as art, simplified science and technology, or life-coaching philosophy, and is therefore disengaged from reality.

This phenomenon of institutional tunnelling, referred to as art, science, and philosophy, reached its peak in ancient Greece and Rome. It effectively converts artists, scientists, and philosophers into assets of the patriarchal system, often causing them to be in *bad conscience*¹⁸ regarding their position. The creation of destinies, or of *moira*, is determined by the *moirasma*: the process of sharing, distributing, allocating, or assigning parts, known as *meros*. In the context of patriarchy, our destiny, or *moira*, is the portion or share, or *meros*, that remains in excess of the *hysteresis* of the dominant parts, as a surplus to the hegemonic capital.

This *theft* of ritual,¹⁹ and of knowledge, thought, and the psyche itself,²⁰ is made largely explicit in the violences (epistemic, physical, psychological and otherwise) that ensue against the hierarchically lower strata (classes, races, sexes, etc.) of patriarchy, and even more explicitly so in the case of *rape*, which can be considered the ultimate case of violence. All rapes (and violent acts in general) are "corrective" rapes: they are violent attempts to redefine what it means to be a woman (or a lesser other, always a feminised other),²¹ according to the man (or the superior, always masculinised) who rapes her, and to also "correct" her thought, and her self-disposition and self-determination (personhood).²² Rapes always imply and hide a violence *in* thought, or *of* thought; or rather, violence is always a violence *towards* thought. (The postcolonial concept of "epistemic violence" is only one part of this.) The man who rapes does not want only sex, or maybe he does not want sex at all; what he mostly wants is to master the thought of the other person, by unmaking her as a *person*. Analogously, any attempt to control thought, by laying it on the Procrustean bed and judging it eligible

to be classified as this or that discourse or discipline, and as knowledge as such, is violence; it is at least harassment.

Not all thought will generate or produce something beyond itself, or will leave that trace which we call knowledge. Most of all, thought, in order to be thought, must be able to generate *more* thought – to be self-motivating. The same applies to every woman, and to every human person, and indeed to every other individual being or entity, even to non-living ones, both organic and inorganic (objects):²³ that they are to produce nothing beyond themselves, and to be no more than self-motivating, has been known and repeated, and at the same time violently overturned, since the time of Aristotle or even before.

Let us return to the *theft of the ritual* and of the *moirasma*, each a pivotal element of both esotericism and philosophy. I asked what the difference is between sophists and philosophers. The sophists had a revival in the Renaissance, and another with poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, who propose some convergences, or affinities, between postmodernism and the sophists (see Derrida 1972/1981; Lyotard and Thébaud 1979/1985).

It is no coincidence that philosophy has aphorised the sage and the sophist, just as it has “aphorised” the aphorism; the sophists were associated with the sage, with *Sophia*. This, François Jullien informs us, the Chinese did not aphorise. Plato aphorised the poets as well, because they embrace the whole of the path, no less than the sages and the sophists.

The Chinese, especially the Confucians, have accommodated themselves to the “centre road” in order to avoid the dislocation of taking sides and adopting points of view; politically, they have deprived themselves of *resistance* (as François Jullien (1998, 228) puts it: “le sage chinois s’est privé de toute possibilité de résistance”). *Resistance* is a concept that is recurrent in Laruelle’s work as well, where he talks of philosophising with the “least resistance”, and of the “democracy of all thought” – that is, the democracy of all points of view, or of all “ways” (“les points de vue s’inversent, les positions sont égales: on accède à la ‘vision’ globale” (ibid., 142); “fait perdre le plan égal des choses et de la pensée” (ibid., 228)).

Philosophy tends to fixate on truth and certainty, which are both fragmentated by points of view. François Jullien (1998, 229) concludes his book by demonstrating that thinking always means taking a position, or a way (*tao*), or a point of view, or a form or idea (*eidos*), or making a *decision*, and determining a rigid meaning: [“la détermination d’un sens (sens rigide – sens contraignant)”] (ibid., 228).

Philosophy is, in principle, a revolutionary practice, in the sense that it attacks or ruptures the *a priori* “conformism of wisdom”; however, wisdom is lost with philosophy, because philosophy forces one to adopt a

point of view (“la ‘petitesse’ des points de vue particuliers”) (ibid., 132), or to take a path (“La sagesse se perd sous la fragmentation des points de vue”),²⁴ or to make a *philosophical decision* (Laruelle).

Philosophy is revolutionary towards “nature” – to the whole path, to the entirety of views, which are the natural order of things, that order which wisdom and poetry both represent. By revolting against “nature”, it becomes more adequately attuned to culture – the institutionalised culture of the cities (the Greek *polis* perfected such institutionalisation). The citizen feels liberated when revolting against nature, much as the philosopher, Jullien says, feels liberated when taking a point of view. That is what one does when philosophising, Jullien writes – when rupturing the “natural” or the entirety of the real – and there is liberation in this *dependence* on philosophising and on points of view: in *holding true* to positions and assaying them through argumentations so that they receive the agreement of the others (“s’il a besoin de convaincre, d’argumenter et, d’abord, tout simplement, de parler, comment ne pas voir aussi combien cette ‘dépendance’ est libératrice”) (ibid., 229).

Jullien draws attention to how *holding true* is not *holding to* (“et tenir vrai n’est pas ‘tenir à’”) (ibid., 229): it does not mean coming to be *depended on*, to the point of fanaticism and of wearing blinkers, or to dogmatism and even to fascism. Extending Jullien’s observation about the distinction between *holding true* (which is the methodological practice or the way of philosophy) and *holding to* (dependence, fixation), I propose that philosophy becomes confused and enmeshed with its own methodology: entangled, undistinguished, and confused with its way of arriving at meaning, truth, decision; with covering part of wisdom and of nature; and with its object. Thus it identifies its methodology with the way of truth, without recognising the positionality of that method. It is, besides, very characteristic of culture to sanctify its technics, its methods (the “*mētis*”, as I analysed it before); and it is characteristic of “civilised”, post-Neolithic humans to define themselves by and become lost in their methods, thinking of them as wisdom: Athena becomes the agent of wisdom, and dethrones *Metis*.

The more liberal cities or states are, the more one becomes dependent on taking positions and holding onto them, fixating on them; this is the origin of fascism, or *the capitalism of ideas*. There is a pleasure in tearing up reality, or nature, or the “mother/earth” (“prendrait plaisir à déchirer la réalité”), or simply the woman – in opening her up (*ouvrir la femme*).²⁵ There is a liberation in dependence, Jullien argues (“cette ‘dépendance’ est libératrice”), and in inequality (“grâce à l’inégalité qu’elle organise, que la parole du philosophe est libératrice”), and a pleasure in tearing up reality (“prendrait plaisir à déchirer la réalité”) (ibid., 229). In order to be a philosopher, I think, one first has to work out how to take account of

and responsibility for all these three immoralities, in spite of their aesthetic and hedonistic delights.

When Societies Were “Built Up of Human Beings”: The Common Practice of Rituals in Esotericism, Religion, Philosophy, Magic, Madness and Neurosis

In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (MR), Bergson (1932/1935) views primitive societies, compared to the civilised state of life today in most places, as societies “built up of human beings”. This observation is completely original and striking. I posit that magic is what gave, and always gives, cohesion to the primitive society, enabling it to be built up merely of humans; and when magic was aborted in the name of rational science, civilised societies stopped being human or *humane* ones. (What *humane* could or should mean is another topic, and posthumanism has some proposals about that.) We are very strongly convinced that magic is paired with the irrational, as in the case of *madness* within civilisation – which, as I will argue, is equivalent to that of magic within primitive societies. Yet Bergson clearly states that magic is rational, as much as reason, the intellect, or intelligence are. They are all pragmatic inventions with a reasonable function: more specifically, a *creative* function, to which one shall rather adapt, than to the function of *habit*.

According to magic – magical thinking, or magical worldview – nature is impregnated by humanity (MR 138, 140). Things are charged with human fluid or special fluid which holds a magic power, residing in things and concepts (MR 143, 161). In primitive societies, humanity, or more accurately humanness, is diffused everywhere; while in civilisation, humanness is considered miasmatic (*miasma*) and obsolete, and intellectual abstractions occupy nature and everything within it, including humanity. This must be (the) madness that has become a substitute for magic.

Both religion and magic function as inventions or ways of making nature bend to our will (MR 139, 141). Magical rituals then become ways in which one propitiates and calls upon the spirits or gods (or eventually one’s own ghosts and phantasms) to ask them to do things that humans cannot. This is how the primitive human being functions, and how the *neurotic* performs rituals for the same purpose. Magic is innate, and it will find its way out even in civilisation, although now labelled madness or neurosis, or simply imagination and art-technics, or technology (the sum of technics).

Science even works with the same intentions and desired outcomes as magic: “It measures and calculates with a view to anticipation and action” (MR 143–44). And “matter cannot be manipulated without some benefit accruing from it” (MR 143). Science is characterised by “willing”, magic by “wishing” (MR 145) – significantly, willing and wishing are two of

Heidegger's usurpers (of Care [*Sorge*]). Magic and science produce "the same moral effect" (MR 145). "Science and magic are both natural" (MR 146) and "we have remained, at bottom, what they [sc. primitive people] were" (MR 146). Dreaming, when the consciousness is sleeping, is an example of magic's returning (or "rushing back" as Bergson writes in MR 146) to the civilised, scientific-ised human, or of the latter regressing (?), or rather progressing (?) to magic. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that dreaming (among other "*psychecryptics*", as I would call them in a semantic opposition to "psychedelics", or among other "tranquillisers" of consciousness) is an example of magic's *regression* to the civilised, scientific-ised human.

In other words, it is more than natural for a society built up of human beings to be a society in which magic is present and legitimate. There is nothing irrational about magic within that society. Our civilised societies have abolished their *humanity–humanness* and are built more upon abstractions and the architecture that houses them. This *banishment of humans* (and of *living* and embodied beings, in general) from our non-primitive, civilised societies is the paradox upon which they are built, and is therefore their functional problematic. They were built upon abstractions in order to guard and support humans more efficiently, but paradoxically humans gave way to a monomania and an obsession with the abstractions, which have overshadowed and supplanted them. This is where the discontents of civilisation originated, in the name of science, which is the descendant of magic – whereas a society which functions through magic is able to preserve its humanity and concentrate its intellect on humans, not on itself. In our civilised societies, the intellect is monomaniacally *amassed* (see *hysteresis*) and concentrated on itself (abstractions, institutions, laws, morals, methods, technics). Bergson himself ascribes the humble function of *pragmatism*²⁶ to the intellect or intelligence, to which civilisation (along with philosophy) instead ascribes awe.

Therefore, the practice of rituals among civilised humans (*neurotics*) and those who are superstitious (*psychotic?*) comes "in contrast with the ordinary pragmatic work of reason" (Moore 1996, 124). In explaining this, Leonard Lawlor (2023) also reveals why madness or magic, or rituals and superstitions (neurosis and psychosis), co-exist in civilisation, where intelligence and the intellect hold such a decisive and honoured role:

Here, for Bergson, in these non-mystical religions we really have madness. So, his second theoretical objective consists in showing why rational beings, "Homo sapiens", are the only beings that believe in "irrational things" (*des choses deraisonable*) (MR 1062/102). He will explain these aberrant beliefs by means of the fact that human beings,

unlike animals, possess intelligence. ... Strictly, for Bergson, before its indefinite extension, magic is rational and not madness (cf. *TM* 1090/136). ... But in order to define mysticism, he must distinguish from the normal view we have of it; normally what we see in mysticism is only “pathological [mental] states” (*MR* 1183/245). ... The reason we associate mysticism with unbalanced states consists in the fact, which Bergson admits, that mystical states are “abnormal” (*TMSR* 1169/228). The “morbid states” of “a lunatic” (*un fou*) resemble mystic raptures and ecstasies (*TMSR* 1169/228–9).

(*Ibid.*, 87 (Appendix I))

In dreams, as in the case of *madness*, perception and memory appear in their clearest form (see Ardoin 2013, 137). Non-functional memories also appear in madness and in dreams (see Gunter 2013, 162). Addressing Bergson’s views on aphasia in *Matter and Memory* (1896), Ben-Ami Schafstein quotes Maine de Biran, who writes:

Nothing could better shed light on the nature and reciprocal influence of the two substances that compose us than well-made observation on the diseases of the mind, like madness and dreams, which are perhaps only a momentary madness. Only a physiological metaphysician can undertake it It is thus that the irregularities of nature are more instructive than its regular ways. One can see by the state of madness how far the state of reason is independent of the will!

(Scharfstein 1943, 68–69)

She says that the “physiological metaphysician” could be Bergson, if the word “madness” were replaced with “insanity and aphasia”.

The notion of madness as a creative force is relevant in Deleuze as well, because it is closer to chaos, as opposed to *habit*, which is a mere repetition or “ground” (see Robinson 2009, 21, 137, 138). In other words, starting from Bergson’s philosophy, I could conclude that madness, within civilisation, takes the same position as magic did (and does) in the primitive state. Just as magic served a function, so do madness and dreams. Magic could be seen as a creative force, acting towards the co-existence of all human beings with all other beings, organic and inorganic – just as madness is (a creative force) in civilisation, albeit with a pathological touch attributed to it: neurosis, psychosis, and, in general, insanity and mental disease. In particular, *neurosis*, as I see it, is the exact equivalent of magic in civilisation, because other types of madness – such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and so on – might better serve as the equivalents of other functional, pragmatic behaviours and inventions in primitive societies. We are the civilised people that pathologise anything reminiscent of the primitive state, out of

a need to differentiate ourselves from it and transcend our raw nature – in vain, because the primitive is still us.

Civilisation's and Philosophy's Great Omission is Magic

The Kinds of Magical Rituals and their Language-Bond: The Case of Neurosis

In its explanation of humanness, what philosophy, or philosophical anthropology more specifically, has entirely left out is magic. The human, from its first encounters in the world, performs magic through *crying* (cf. Róheim 1955, 48–49). Through crying, a completely different effect is produced: the baby earns the mother's attention, and the mother gives it food and human affection. In adulthood, the human unconsciously continues to act upon desires and needs through other forms of behaviour that metaphorically and symbolically resemble crying. These behaviours include every type of ritual, whether religious (e.g. prayer, sacrifice) or scientific (doing A brings about B, e.g. chemistry, medicine, physics). Both religious and scientific rituals are *magical rituals*. Primitive people used the same rituals, but with less advanced knowledge of the correct order of the ritual elements, and the correct cluster or sequence of ritualistic acts, to make each specific goal or achievement productive. As Paul Radin writes:

It may then be correct to say that while, strictly speaking, primitive man does not think of a cause-and-effect sequence, he does predicate causes as such and effects as such; that the medicine-man and thinker deal with causes as such and sometimes with a real cause-and-effect relation, whereas the average man deals with effects simply.

(Radin 1927, 30)

Through “repetition-compulsion”, or the correct detection of which habits do what (experimentation, experience, organisation through the prevalence of rational methods), humanity has developed its magical methods to achieve desired goals. This happened in the same way that, while growing up, one masters one's habits and turns them into better performing and more functional (or *productive*) ones. These habits ultimately construct the *personality* (Róheim 1955, 82) of the individual and the culture of the group. Repetition-compulsion might be yet another definition of *habit*.

Both scientific and religious rituals, namely *magical rituals*, aim at control of the other: first the mother, through crying, and then the environment, the other, nature, the world, reality, always through certain specially evolved habits, fitted to each specific goal. Maybe the need for fulfilment is always rooted in separation anxiety, in being parted from the mother. Human individuality is traumatic and the human is never fully ready

to accept it, and perhaps is never capable of doing so: “all our strivings (magic) aim at a reunion with the object” (ibid.), which is at first the mother, and then the other:

We all have a character, that is, a personality, and we all tend to repeat certain reactions and to believe that our way is the right way, that it will ward off danger and achieve happiness. This is certainly unconscious magic, relying on a specific formula developed in childhood. The repetition compulsion keeps us true to ourselves and prevents the loss of our infantile introjects or love objects.

(Ibid., 81–82)

What binds together scientific rituals, religious rituals, and any other rituals? It is words. It is *language*. Philosophical rituals, artistic rituals, and neurotic rituals are all bound together by language. They all fall under the umbrella of magic; they are magical rituals, for the reasons explained above. The neurotic, the artist, and the philosopher, just as much as the priest and the scientist, work or act with spells. They form specific *language bodies*, which are phrases, or texts, or theories that will tame or *civilise* the object – the world, the environment, the other. This is what civilisation is about: *mastering the spells (theories and methods) that civilise or tame the object, which is the other (than the self)*. In primitive societies, words have magical power; they are not only vehicles of communication, information, and knowledge. In western civilisation, words are commonalities, breaths of sound; they have no power to change or create events. They are spoken lightly. Here is what a field anthropologist observes about magic or witchcraft in the Bocage:

I wrote that I wanted to study witchcraft practices in the Bocage. ... In the field, however, all I came across was language. For many months, the only empirical facts I was able to record were words. Today I would say that an attack of witchcraft can be summed up as follows: a set of words spoken in a crisis situation by someone who will later be designated as a witch are afterwards interpreted as having taken effect on the body and belongings of the person spoken to, who will on that ground say he is bewitched. ... So perhaps, I was not entirely mistaken when I said I wanted to study practices: the act, in witchcraft, is the word. ... Now, witchcraft is spoken words; but these spoken words are power and not knowledge or information. To talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform. ... [S]omeone who ... wants to know for the sake of knowing, is literally unthinkable. For a single word (and only a word) can tie or untie a fate In short, there is no neutral position with spoken words: in witchcraft, words wage war.

(Favret-Saada 1980, 9–10)

Such *spells* aim to access a power over this world through the Otherworld. This Otherworld is the place where the imagination resides; it is therefore a place of the mind, which the human transcends when passing into sublimity or the Otherworld, in need of a place where one can derive legitimation and authority for one's actions and therefore one's life or *ethos* (habitus-ethics):

The issue of power has been a central preoccupation in this study, both within the magical subculture and in the anthropological encounter. I have shown how the acquisition of a magical identity concerns spiritual healing – a “reconnection” with the otherworld as the true source of being and empowerment. The control of otherworldly powers can bring personal power; but its misuse is also said to bring imbalance and, at worst, madness. The otherworld is the ultimate locus of legitimation and authority.

(Greenwood 2000, 211)

This locus influenced another aspect of magic:

the development of magic as a discourse of *alterity* in the ancient Mediterranean. While, to a certain extent, stereotypes of the magician and witch crossed social boundaries in the ancient world, the specific details of a community's magic representations emerged out of and reflected local factors and concerns. For this reason, magic discourse varied from period to period and location to location, evolving and adapting to the ideological exigencies of each situation. As a constellation of terms and ideas designating *Otherness*, *illegitimacy*, and *danger*, magic constituted a key element in the construction of notions about *legitimate and illegitimate authority* in the formative period of Western thought.

(Stratton 2007, 177, emphasis mine)

Magic is the only way to achieve anything in reality. A philosophy of action can arrive at no other answer than magic:

Following Freud's (1911, p. 409) definition of the pleasure principle as wish fulfilment in imagination, and of the reality principle as the ability to weight the pros and cons of a situation, we must postulate a third or *magical principle* that deals with the world outside as if it were governed by our wishes or drives or emotions. We hasten to remark that this attitude, while completely unrealistic because it is an archaism, because it reacts to the world *as if* the world were the dual unity of child and mother, is at the same time the only way in which we can achieve

something in reality. Certainly, if we do not believe that we *can* get what we want, even that we can get it *because* we want it, we could not get it simply on the basis of realistic action. *We might therefore say that mankind functions mainly according to the magical principle.*

(Róheim 1955, 82–83. Referring to Freud 1911/1924, 409–17.
Translation Freud 1911/1958, 213–26)

Diderot uses the example of Medea, “the witch”. Medea is History, and magic is the Revolution: it is “the historical process of renewal” (Wygant 2007, 192).

When something prevents the human from overpowering and controlling the Otherworld, magic turns on the subject, or the self, instead of the object or the other – although what it is meant to turn against is always the object. There is no subtle masochistic tendency here; there is simply no other way to turn against the object than to perform rituals against it within one’s own subjectivity. This is the case of neurosis:

Magic, as we find it in neurosis, frequently appears in a negative form, as aggression turned against the ego. A young girl once exclaimed excitedly during the analytic hour, “I ought to cut my tongue out, and that would castrate all the men.” When we sometimes say that in melancholia and its milder forms the object is introjected and the aggression turned against the ego, it is really the object which is meant. What we are really saying is that this is a form of magic to destroy the object. This roundabout quality is characteristic of many forms of magic.

(Róheim 1955, 80. For a further discussion of neurosis and magic, see 63–85, and for some theories on magic see 48–51)

Where Don Quixote took his desires or imaginings for realities, whether as a defence mechanism or, as Michel Onfray says, because of or as a denial (see Onfray 2014), in neuroticism one considers one’s actions towards oneself to be actions committed towards the object or the other. The neurotic’s actions are governed by *the magical principle* – and Don Quixote’s, perhaps, by the quantum principle? What entire traditions, cultures, theories, religions, sciences, and civilisation itself (particularly during the Enlightenment) were created to obtain and ensure is *predictability* (certainty, doubt, safety, [control]). This the neurotic single-handedly – *solely* by himself – re-takes, re-performs, re-simulates, or re-actualises.²⁷

Conclusion

Various fields within the humanities have become interested in notions and concepts that indirectly manifest an intuition, or a renewal of the knowledge,

that philosophy and esotericism are closely connected. The distinctions between the *vivant* and the *vecu*, and between *life-forms* (*formes-vivantes*) and *forms of life* (*formes-de-vie*), are not limited to living human beings; the last few years have seen a growing interest in applying these notions to other *life-forms* – to other living entities, most notably animals, plants, and micro-organisms. This interest is directly associated with newly emergent fields and concepts, such as posthumanism, transhumanism, ahumanism, the Anthropocene, Critical Life Studies, Queer Death Studies, “Leaky Bodies and Ontologies”, and bio-art.²⁸ It is also seen in a turn back to “nature” (*ensauvagement*) and neo-primitivism,²⁹ political ecology, eco-feminism, and geophilosophy or geo/philosophy; and in concerns about the “damaged earth/world” (*collapsologies*), environmental humanities, multispecies studies, and so forth. These have led to the formation of various eco-analyses in philosophy and the social sciences. What is also very indicative of this turn is the return to practices such as shamanism³⁰ and to psychedelic studies, which in recent years have become new forms of “spiritualism”, or perhaps a materialist, non-anthropocentric, or completely ahumanist cosmo-eco-spiritualism and *sympoesis*. These discourses attempt to give agency not only to animal and vegetal beings,³¹ but also to inorganic matter, or to nature as a whole. Indications of the latter include Olivier Rемаud’s (2020) book *Penser comme un iceberg* and Bruno Latour’s famous concept of the “parliament of things”, which potentially gives agency not only to natural, inorganic matter but also to artefacts.

Other such concepts, which I will not explore at length here, include philosophy’s “postlinguistic turn”, which is related to the acknowledgement of an all-colonising Anthropocene, and in which things are allowed to speak for themselves. Another is Michel Serres’ concept of “quasiobjects”, an attempt to abolish the modernist dichotomy of subject and object; Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers have also tried to achieve this, claiming that a “voice” comes *from* objects rather than from the human subject. Stengers has formulated the relevant notion of “cosmopolitics”, and also described the “antagonism” between magic and science. The notion of *magic* – along with spiritualism and mysticism – is also returning as a major discourse, taking its place next to science, philosophy, ecology, psychology, and so on, as a way of knowing, approaching, and perceiving the relations within the world.³² In general, there is a bold turn to the world (*cosmos*) more widely, replacing the fixation with social surroundings or the social world, the “usages” of the world, how to “make” a world, and so on (*trouver le monde, usages du monde, faire du monde, perdre du monde, nostalgie du monde*, etc.).³³ This involves both ethical and aesthetic values: a turn towards normative questioning about what to do with the world. For example, Jérôme Dokic extensively explores the aesthetic appreciation (“intense aesthetic experience”, awe, sublime, “limit-experiences”) or the

“affective phenomenology” (the affective phenomena of both ordinary and pathological perception) of the “ordinary world” and of nature. Employing the lens of analytic philosophy, unusually enough, he examines what it is to find the Sublime in nature, and thus repositions both aesthetics and the Sublime from their traditional association with man-made artefacts and fictions to the ordinary world, nature, science, and so on.

There is also a great discussion of “ego-dissolution”: of what can be experienced as the infusion of the world within the self, or the unification of both, and perhaps also a meta-cognitive sense of estrangement – the uncanny, the so-called “oceanic feeling” (named by Romain Rolland and then also explored by Freud) experienced by the ego or the self within these processes. Contributions to this discussion have come from many different directions: philosophy of mind, cognitive science, neuroscience, psychedelic studies, spiritualism, shamanism, and other “auto-transcendental” experiences. All these ways of framing the topic deal with *finding* or *discovering* the world in one way or another, and also with the modification of the distinctions, the limits, the frontiers, or the circumscribed “membranes”, in what might be called the “immunological” *autopoiesis*, or *autopoietic* “immunity”, between the one and the other. Consequently, the kind of holism that Jérôme Dokic attributes to self-transcendent experiences (*expériences auto-transcendantes*), with an emphasis on “world-directed” rather than “object-oriented” experiences (his terminology is drawn from the existing literature), is the focus of the contemporary “New Realism” movement in philosophy.

These turns within the humanities, as well as the general turn towards a more serious and academic study of esotericism, will bring philosophy and esotericism still closer together, and will elucidate and re-conceptualise philosophical practice in more creative directions, bringing it closer to what philosophy used to be, or what it has the potential to be, which I have depicted throughout this chapter.

Notes

- 1 Some of the concepts I will be using in this chapter are taken from biology, psychiatry, psychopathology, psychology, psychoanalysis, and neurology. They include the classical concepts of *neurosis*, *psychosis* and *perversion*, which are to be understood as clusters of emotions, affective states, moods, thoughts, behaviours, characteristics and personality traits, and, in general, as philosophical “anthropologies”, rather than the very content-specific categorisations that other fields use.
- 2 This view of philosophy as a spiritual exercise or *askesis*, under the influence of Stoicism (see, Kotva 2020), comes from modernity (especially through French Spiritualism). It is present in even contemporary philosophers, such as,

apart from Hadot and Foucault, in the work of Peter Sloterdijk and in a latent form in some feminists, such as Luce Irigaray.

- 3 Very schematically, I associate *existence* with the inorganic, *being* with the somewhat organic, and *living* with living organisms, or living beings. Cf. Christodoulou 2022a.
- 4 I refer here to Eugène Minkowski's theory of schizophrenia, which is largely based on, and influenced by, Bergson's theory of the "battle" and the inconsistency between *intelligence* and the *élan vital*.
- 5 But then, maybe one should keep in mind that the puritanism in philosophical thinking, especially in its academic setting, is a repercussion of its *amitié* with theology; philosophy has become, in its canon, mostly a "theologicophilosophismus", especially in the universities, which started as theological schools and have only fairly recently attempted secularisation. One can find such puritanism, abstemiousness, prudence, austerity and *asceticism*, dispossessed and bereaved (or even robbed) of *askesis*, along with such constraints, taboos, and (theological) neuroticism, in the philosophical thinkers of antiquity, or in the canonical "widowers" and "orphans". This becomes even clearer when one attempts to write an academic paper, where the process is often experienced as an attempt to submit an evangelium before the Inquisition, and any suspicion of heresy threatens to produce a further schism within the Canon. To be *canonised*, in theology, is to become a saint; similar processes, to a large degree, apply within academic philosophy. If, however, one seeks to be canonised, it is wiser, theoretically and practically, but most importantly *existentially*, to do so within the theological milieu, rather than the philosophical one; it connotes a difference in degree, between becoming a *saint*, on the one hand, and becoming a (mere) philosopher within the academic standards, on the other.
- 6 See the radical anthropologists' theories, especially Chris Knight's and Camilla Power's.
- 7 See Power 2021. See also LaValle Norman 2021; Tricarico 2018; Robbins Dexter and Mair 2010; and a painting by Frans Francken the Younger (1581–1642), *Bravery of the Persian Women* (oil on copper panel), circa 1600. This painting portrays one of the stories narrated by Plutarch in *Moralia* (vol. 5), related to the courage of women. The women displayed their nakedness when Cyrus, leader of the Persian army, tried to enter his city, with the danger that the enemy might be drawn to it. Women lifted their skirts (the literal etymology of the word *anasyrma*) and the soldiers were ashamed and scared, and thus retreated. There are similar stories of Chinese women doing so, standing on city walls in the nineteenth century, and of 7000 African women doing so in 1958, in western Cameroon, where they raised their skirts, as a manifestation and display of yoni power, in order to protest against certain regulations regarding the way they practised farming. History provides numerous other examples, and the practice continues today.
- 8 See, indicatively, Hadot 1995c; Hadot 2001; Bolton 1962; Bremmer 2018; Dodds 1951/1977; Gagné 2021; Hamayon 1995; Laks and Most 2016; Meuli 1935; Stépanoff 2019.

- 9 For a simpler overview of spirituality in the naturalistic sense, and of the role of psychedelics, see Letheby 2020. For further details, see Letheby 2021.
- 10 I am referring here to some of the basic conceptual components of Varela's and Maturana's theory of *autopoiesis*.
- 11 Although, it is otherwise, on a theoretical level, the *primary* principle within Philosophy out of the following three: *connection, aspiration, questioning*. Namely, on the meta-philosophical level, the principle of *questioning* is the *par excellence* philosophical principle and it even usurps, negates, and omits the other two principles, thus rendering philosophy to "poor philosophy".
- 12 For the full quotation, see Hegel and Schelling 1802/1985, 282–283: "On the other hand, there is a prevalent manner of proceeding that has only unprofitable aspects: to wit, that which is at pains to make philosophical ideas popular, or more precisely, common, as soon as they appear on stage. Philosophy is, by its very nature, something esoteric, neither made for the vulgar as it stands [*für sich*], nor capable of being got up to suit the vulgar taste; it only is philosophy in virtue of being directly opposed to the understanding and hence even more opposed to healthy common sense, under which label we understand the limitedness in space and time of a race of men; in its relationship to common sense the world of philosophy is in and for itself an inverted world." Cf. Magee (2007, 20–36).
- 13 For an alternative analysis of Luce Irigaray's mysticism, and of the mysticism of other philosophers, see Hollywood 1994, 2016, 2002. Regarding Irigaray, see especially the chapter "From Lack to Fluidity: Luce Irigaray, *La Mystérique*", in Hollywood (2002, 187–210). See also Priest 2003.
- 14 The concepts of *violence* and *pluralism* are central to his philosophy.
- 15 Although scientific discourses chose prose, the ancient medical doctor Galen chose poetry for his medical teachings, for two reasons: first, poems are easily remembered, and second, the symmetry of the poetic ingredients prevents errors in the prescribed dosages. See Jacques 2004, 114–115.
- 16 Sophists openly reveal their methods, which can also be called *mētis*, as in the mythic-symbolic goddess Mētis (mother of Athena). Mētis represents technique or method, which does not transform into Athena (*sophia; philo-sophia*: the love of Athena, the patriarchal goddess) like the multiple gods and goddesses, symbols, cognitive metaphors, and worldviews that have been transformed into their patriarchal alternatives. This transformation coincides with the significant effect of agriculture, which can be seen as the grand method or technique, the *grand-mētis* (or the *grand addiction* of agriculture) of possessing and altering nature. Agriculture is the first unified, *systematised* and *systematic* method or technic for this (alluding to systematicism in philosophy, when it attempts to circumscribe itself and exclude esoteric discourses). It is believed that humanity was in a primitive, unsophisticated state until the development of civilisation. Civilisation may be understood as culture, the accumulation of techniques, the *grand-mētis* (Athena), methodology, and agriculture. With agriculture came an organised and methodical approach or methodology for cultivating crops and raising livestock. The replacement of Mētis with Athena in Zeus' domain, where birth now occurs from the head, exemplifies a strategic

- manoeuvre concerning *M/mētis* in mythology. This shift was orchestrated to serve the interests of patriarchy, effectively transforming it into a patriarchal methodology.
- 17 Under one interpretation, which is very relevant to an emotion or a condition, or even to a *habitus* deriving from art, empathy is an “aesthetic appreciation of the other”. This interpretation is close to its origins in the German word *Einfühlung*, which denotes, according to German psychologists of the nineteenth century, “an aesthetic transfer of our subjective experiences into objects in the world” (see Lanzoni 2021, 2018). If one examines empathy in connection with the word *sympathy* (since *empathia* in Greek has quite the opposite sense, of maliciousness and malevolence), then empathy, as a transcription of sympathy (*sympatheia*), has a physical, a metaphysical, and an onto-anthropological meaning. From these an aesthetic one can also be derived, denoting a kinship with the other and the world (*cosmos*).
 - 18 See *false consciousness* in Marxism, *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*) in Existentialism, and Nietzsche’s *slave morality*.
 - 19 See Christodoulou 2022a, 2022b, 2022c.
 - 20 What I have elsewhere called *psychia*, in an unpublished paper: see Christodoulou 2016.
 - 21 A lesser (subaltern, to use the postcolonial vocabulary) *life-form*, or *form-of-life*; a lesser form of existence, or being, or life or living, of the metaphysical, ontological, existential, logical, ethical, political and aesthetic kind, or even the virtual kind, as Souriau 1943/2009 emphasises (see Lapoujade 2017).
 - 22 Rose 2021 highlights the “corrective” quality of all rapes, as well as their “mission” to make up the victims’ minds for them.
 - 23 In contemporary philosophy, especially in the New Realisms and New Materialisms (Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented Ontology, etc.), and in (Post)-Philosophy and Non-Philosophy (Laruelle), a major thematic is the *return* to the *object(s)* through a certain “democracy” of all thought, as well as one of all things. Such a conceptualisation of objects was anticipated by Jean Baudrillard and other diverse thinkers and movements or schools of thought, including the vitalists. Very recently an extended essay on this subject, borrowing from the previous literatures, has been written by Byung-Chul Han (2021), whose books resonate with all the issues arising and re-arising in contemporary culture and thought. With a popularising (some would say vulgarising) style, Han has written on eros, the transparent society, the burnout society, the palliative society, lingering, digitalism, neoliberalism, psychopolitics, new forms of power, and still other topics (see also Borchardt 2021). Han has also written recently about the disappearance of rituals (as I discovered in the course of developing my own thoughts on the subject) (see Han 2019; for the translation, see Han 2020).
 - 24 See the aphoristically titled chapter “La sagesse se perd sous la fragmentation des points de vue”: Jullien (1998, 127–134).
 - 25 Cf. Didi-Huberman 1999, where *nudité offerte* is transformed into *nudité ouverte*, and Venus, or the Woman, is “opened”.

- 26 See Moore (1996, 123–139). On the notions of the instinct and the intellect in Bergson, see also Mullarkey (Ó Maoilearca) (1999, 118–120).
- 27 Einstein so profoundly sought the existence of a *stable* universe that he added to all of his primary equations the cosmological *constant*.
- 28 With “Leaky Bodies”, I am referring to the diffusion of subject–object, informed by biomedicine and applied to feminist discourse, as in Shildrick’s (1997) analysis. The contemporary field of *bio-art* is to a large degree based on this very postmodern idea of a diffusion, a mixing of boundaries and of “leaky” bodies and ontologies. The term “Leaky Ontologies” is used in the title of the American Comparative Literature Association’s (ACLA’s) Virtual Seminar “Leaky Ontologies”, organised by Pedro Lopes de Almeida, which took place online between 9 and 11 April 2021.
- 29 *Geophilosophy* or *geo/philosophy* is a recently developed concept (based to a large degree on Deleuze’s similar geo-philosophical concepts) (see Mackay 2010; Castro 2021, 18–30). For the turn back towards “nature” (*ensauvagement*) and neo-primitivism, see Dalgarrondo and Fournier 2020, 2019.
- 30 These recent discourses are attempting something with a much longer history. The ancient discourse, or rather practice, of shamanism – or the shamanic experience, involving imaginative travel in the mind that is then communicated and transmitted to others – has at its centre the relations between humans and non-humans, or in other words trans-species relationships. For definitions see Stépanoff 2019.
- 31 For the concept of “sympoesis” see Sturm (2020, 601–605).
- 32 Cf. Stengers 2002/2019. See also, concerning the “return” of magic to various discourses, Weil 1952/1991/2003; Kakar 1991.
- 33 See Remaud 2020. For a comprehensive critical analysis of Latour’s concepts, especially the “parliament of things”, see Lash (1999, 267–284) (“Objects that Judge: Latour’s Parliament of Things”). On the intersection between the Anthropocene, the “postlinguistic turn”, the concepts of the “parliament of things”, “quasiobjects”, “cosmopolitics”, etc. see Simons (2017, 1–25). Another work concerning the same topic is Besse 2013; see also Latour 1999/2004.

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3 Mystical Ensemble

(Re)defining Mysticism

Antti Piilola

Introduction

Within the philosophy of mysticism, one can find a wide variety of definitions, understandings, and approaches to mysticism.¹ The focus is often on the nature, content, and cultivation of mystical experiences, and the variety of definitions of mysticism usually come paired with a corresponding understanding of the nature of mystical experiences. This variety comes both from mystics and mystical traditions,² which span thousands of years, as well as from scholars of mysticism who have spent a lot of ink trying to capture this elusive phenomenon. Especially within the philosophy of mysticism, a variety of definitions, classifications, and categories of mysticism and mystical experience have been proposed over the last hundred or so years, but there is no clear consensus to be found, and most academic studies of mysticism need to declare and (re)define the kind of mysticism that is the focus of their research.

From an academic point of view, such diversity is generally seen as problematic since it can be exceedingly difficult to find analytic commensurability between different understandings. In this chapter, as a response to this oft-confusing diversity in which meanings are bound to get lost and interaction is difficult, I argue that the difficulties and the variety of definitions is a natural and even necessary consequence of the subject matter of mysticism – a human encounter with the Ultimate – and the variety of definitions parallels the variety of the onto-existential³ shapes and configurations that such encounters can take.

In the first part (after the introduction), I propose an approach to mysticism that takes its point of departure from this very variety and offers a way to evaluate and analyse various mysticisms regardless of their differences and apparent incommensurability. The core of my argument is that any understanding of mysticism can be approached as a tripartite structure, composed of a variety of aspects, features, and elements that are arranged under three categories: the subject, the Object, and the

mystical experience. Furthermore, reverberating across these categories is the tension between ineffability and the noetic quality, which distinguishes mysticism as a unique field of study. At its most basic, the philosophy of mysticism is an attempt to explain both the gap and the bridge between the effable subject and the ineffable Object.

I present the principle of coherence as the central virtue in all scholarly pursuits and examine how it is particularly relevant for understanding the value of the variety within mysticism. The purpose of the principle is to help ensure that each aspect, feature, and element included in one's understanding of mysticism is commensurable with each other, that is, that mysticism – no matter how far beyond the ordinary its contours reach – forms a coherent whole. If and when this principle is broken, it can help recognise limitations and contrivances, and in so doing it helps ensure that the concept of mysticism is applicable to, and commensurable with, whichever context it is being applied to.

In short, the purpose of the tripartite approach to mysticism that I am proposing is to provide a vantage point from which to analyse and evaluate the various configurations that mysticism can take. Moreover, since many of the aspects, features, and elements that mysticism describes are also relevant to other fields of study, the study of mysticism doesn't have to be isolated from the rest of academia.

In the second part, the understanding of mysticism proposed in the first part will be applied to two recent approaches to esotericism – a phenomenon whose academic study shares some interesting parallels with the philosophy of mysticism. I contrast Wouter Hanegraaff's denial of the usefulness of (a particular understanding of) mysticism in the context of the study of esotericism with a strong endorsement of (a very different understanding of) mysticism by Glenn Alexander Magee, who sees the mystical doctrine of oneness as forming the basis of the esoteric worldview.

To showcase the difficulties that can arise when "mysticism" is not clearly (re)defined, locating the context and basis of Hanegraaff's critique of mysticism requires a detour through footnotes and references to another scholar, Boaz Huss, and to a critique of mysticism that is based on a theological assumption included in the use of mysticism as an analytical category. By applying the tripartite understanding of mysticism, it becomes evident that the mysticism whose analytic usefulness is being denied is incomplete.

However, in a very interesting twist of research, Hanegraaff proposes the term *gnosis* as an alternative to mysticism, something that not only contains the tripartite structure in a coherent configuration but that also acknowledges ineffability. In addition, from the point of view of the philosophy of mysticism, it appears that the misconstrued and incomplete conception of mysticism can be replaced by a complete one. In contrast,

while Magee's understanding of mysticism forms a complete picture, the tripartite configuration reveals some limitations and concepts that require further clarification.

Finally, after a brief summary, I conclude by looking at the role and value of mysticism within academia. The vantage point that mysticism offers across the academic landscape might not be easily accessible, but depending on what one is looking for, the variety of possible views can be highly rewarding.

The Mystical Variety

One of the pioneering and most notable scholars of the modern study of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, writes in her seminal work, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, "Those who use the term 'Mysticism' are bound in self-defence to explain what they mean by it" (Underhill 2004, xiv). Consequently, over one hundred years later, my intention is to do exactly that, that is, to try and explain what I mean by mysticism. Furthermore, I also attempt to explain and defend what others mean by mysticism, regardless of my agreement or, as is often the case, lack thereof. I propose a tripartite structure of mysticism that is not only helpful in analysing and evaluating various definitions of mysticism but that can also substantiate the variety itself by illustrating and clarifying the quality of mysticism that invites or even necessitates the scholar of mysticism to explain herself again and again.

The variety of different "mysticisms" that the last hundred or so years has produced is too vast to be covered here in any detail, but as a general observation, they always concern the human encounter with the Absolute. The differences between them are mainly the result of the arrangement and interplay between the subject, the Object, and the mystical experience, that is, between the three categories of the tripartite structure introduced below. Before that, however, there is one overarching premise that, in all its obviousness, plays a defining role in everything that follows.

The Principle of Coherence

I assume there to be an uncontroversial scholarly principle that pertains to the value and validity of academic "knowledge". It is obvious to such a degree that its existence is noted only when it is broken. The point of bringing it up here is that the understanding and approach to mysticism that I am about to describe uses this very principle to define itself. It is so general and simple that I doubt it even has a name, so I take the opportunity to name it the *principle of non-contrived commensurability*, although for the sake of clarity (and coherence), I opt to use "coherence"

and “the principle of coherence” instead. Simply put, the principle of coherence states that everything included in the production of scholarly/scientific knowledge, from applied methodologies to attained results and everything in between, needs to constitute a coherent whole without relying on any extraneous ad hoc hypotheses or any other contrived elements.

In the context of this inquiry, this means that the Object, the subject, and the mystical experience between them need to constitute a coherent whole. What makes mysticism so unique, that is, mystical, is the nature and the range of aspects, elements, and features that are needed to form the whole. For example, if the Object of a mystical experience is defined as God, then the mystical experience and its subject need to be defined and understood in a way that allows – is commensurable and coherent with – God as the Object. Significantly, everything that is further said about mysticism and its ramifications needs to conform, be commensurable and coherent with not just God as the Object, but also with the mystical experience and the subject that can have God as the Object. To take the example even further, if the Object is defined as self-existing and immutable, then everything else included in all three categories needs to accommodate that, and vice versa; the Object needs to take everything included in the three categories into account. Although, as we will later see, mysticism also has a built-in way to circumvent and even transcend some of the limitations of the principle of coherence.

The Categories

In Underhill’s understanding of mysticism, we find an example of the three categories in action (numbering mine):

Broadly speaking, I understand it to be the expression of the [1] innate tendency of the [1] human spirit towards complete [2] harmony with the [3] transcendental order; whatever be the [3] theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great [1] mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their [1] life and, in the experience called [2] “mystic union,” attains its end. Whether that [3] end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy.

(Underhill 2004, xiv)

The “human spirit”, its “innate tendency” and the mystical way of “life” refer to mystical anthropology, that is, the nature and role of the mystic as the (1) subject of (2) mystical experiences; a “mystic union”,⁴ a “harmony” with (3) the Object of mystical experience, whether it is called

“God/World-soul/Absolute”. The same categories in the classical approach are expressed by William James:

In [2] mystic states [1] we both become one with [3] the Absolute and we become aware of our [2] oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed.

(James 2004, 324)

Next, I briefly present the three categories. It is important to note that the lines drawn between them are amorphous, and when the principle of coherence allows, or even requires it, there can be much overlap and shared contours between different categories. However, regardless of how indeterminate and unsettled the categories themselves are, they still need to form a settled and determinate coherent whole in which the mystical experience bridges the gap between the subject and the Object.

The Mystical Object

The Object is often simply a matter of declaration, something that is pre-determined either by mystics and the doctrines of their tradition or by the theological and/or philosophical framework of which the study of mysticism is a part. It is as easy as it is common to simply say that the Object is “God”, “Absolute”, “Truth”, “the One”, that is, something that is considered to be the ultimate, transcendent, holy, and especially ineffable enough (see below) to qualify the subject’s encounter with it as mystical. The variety and difficulties arise, and the actual philosophy of mysticism begins, as soon as it is no longer viable to consider the Object as a mere label, that is, when one is required to elucidate what is actually meant by “God”, or whatever the Object happens to be and how it relates to the subject and the mystical experience. No matter how (mono)theistic and transcendent, there is a whole pantheon of different ways to understand and define God, each understanding shaping the whole of mysticism in its own image. Similarly, the One and the Absolute, even if their definitions most emphatically attempt to exclude any kind of division, often find different expressions and end up taking vastly different metaphysical shapes within different paradigms.

The above complexity, of course, is not specific to the philosophy of mysticism. Already for thousands of years, philosophers have been searching around and beyond reality for fundamental structures to keep it all together, for something that can explain why there is something rather than nothing. But what is specific to mysticism is that even if this fundamental structure is transcendent, beyond being, or however its ultimacy is

characterised and labelled, it is also something that is in an onto-existential relation with the subject. Outside philosophy, scholars of mysticism are generally not too concerned with the philosophical ramifications of the labels they apply or identify with the Object. This might not be a problem as long as the research(er) doesn't pretend otherwise and doesn't claim that the mere label given to the Object by itself captures all the rich philosophical and theological variety that can come with it. At the same time, however, even if it's only a label, the Object still has to conform and be shaped by the subject and the mystical experience and by the philosophical variety that the subject and experience bring to the table.

Here is where the principle of coherence comes into play. Regardless of the kind of ultimate that is considered to be the Object – even if one attempts to keep it as a mere label for something transcendent – the principle of coherence will demand an answer to how the subject, a human being, can have anything to do with something transcendent, that is, something that is beyond being or even the source of all being. Just to give an example, one of the “easiest” and most common answers is to simply do away with the separation between the subject and the Object. With nothing to separate the two, there is only one(ness), and both the ultimacy/transcendence of the Object and the connection between the subject and the Object are at least partially secured, that is, they conform with the principle of coherence.

Similarly to the ease of simply labelling the Object, it is easy and common to simply declare a generic “oneness” between the subject and the Object. However, the onto-existential connection by itself expands and elevates both the subject and the Object from being mere labels. If the nature and the problems that arise from metaphysical oneness are not in any way explored, the resulting mysticism, while possibly conforming with the principle of coherence, is bound to be limited in both philosophical scope and depth. However, the point of this article is itself already deep enough, and before we get caught up in ontological simplicity, divine aseity, or anything else that one might find in the metaphysical oneness and the ineffable abyss beneath all things ultimate, it is time to just make a note of everything that plays a significant role in understanding the Object, and thus mysticism as a whole.

In summary, while it is relatively simple to pick and choose the Object of a mystical experience from one's preferred or adopted metaphysical, theological, or any environment, the ultimacy itself can be very complex. If the ultimacy is simply assumed, if the nature of the Truth that is encountered is not elaborated, it will limit the philosophical and theological implications and the scope of mysticism. At the same time, when any detail and depth is added to the nature of the Object, the subject and the mystical experience need to adhere to it – to be commensurable with it.

As a final note on the topic of the Object, it is, of course, also possible to deny any ultimacy from the object of a mystical experience or to be agnostic about it at the least. Perhaps the “object” of experiences usually labelled as mystical is simply the result of an uncommon, but ultimately ordinary process of the mystic’s cognitive apparatus. There is no need to postulate anything at the other end of the experience. The whole of the mystical experience (and mysticism) is to be found between the mystic’s ears and behind his eyes. While this is a valid approach, the scope of such mysticism is categorically different from the kind of mysticism that includes the Object, and it might not be coherent to consider them together. However, the presence of the Object doesn’t mean that there is nothing of relevance going on with or within the subject.

The Mystical Subject

No matter how extraordinary, dedicated, spiritual, or whatever the requirement for someone to break through to the Absolute, the mystic is also a human being, existing within the plethora of necessities, possibilities, and limitations that being human is all about. Whether the focus is on the soul, the brain, (social) psychology or any other phenomenologically relevant and generative facet of mystical experience, the role of the subject, or the lack thereof, has been at the centre stage of the philosophy of mysticism for the better part of a century.

The question is rather straightforward: does the mystic’s cognitive, socio-linguistic, and religio-cultural background and make up play a role in forming the content of mystical experiences as they occur, or does their formative role, if any, come only after the mystical experience when the subject reflects and interprets the experience? In other words, are mystical experiences “mediated” like ordinary experiences and subject to the theories and methods used to understand them, or are they “unmediated” experiences, forming their own unique category that cannot be understood by ordinary methods?

In fact, one of the main motivations behind the approach to mysticism described here is to expand the typical scope of mysticism by moving away from stagnated debates regarding the nature of mystical experiences and whether or not they are constructed like ordinary experiences (constructivism vs. nonconstructivism). A related debate that often gets confused with the above is how to interpret mystical doctrines (contextualism vs. perennialism). A final question regards whether there is a category of mystical experiences with a singular, “common core” object (essentialism).⁵

Outside of these debates, if not unrelated to them, there is the deeper question of the meaning of mysticism. It regards not just the “how” but also the “why” of the subject’s onto-existential relation with the Object.

Why is there a gap between the subject and the Object in the first place, and why should the subject strive to cross it? Mysticism often includes a soteriological dimension that attempts to account for both the separation (gap) and the noetic salvation (bridge) between the subject and the Object. Soteriology itself can take many shapes, and again, all the hows and whys it brings to mysticism need to be coherent with the Object and the mystical experience, that is, a coherent part of the unified whole.

Finally, included within the category of the subject is the mystical way of life: how the subject lives his or her life before and after the encounter with the Object, and what kind of disposition and practices are thought to be relevant to the mystical path, for bridging the gap between the mystic and the Object. Considering the subject matter of mysticism, it is no mystery that the subject's understanding of mysticism and the subject's relation to the Object can have an impact to how one lives one's life. Whether the way of life affects the Object is a bit more difficult question but no less relevant. One way or another, it needs to adhere to the coherent whole.

The Mystical Experience

Quite often within the academic study of mysticism, what is understood as a mystical experience is what mysticism is all about. A mystical experience is the bridge between the subject and the Object, and while the Object determines both the depth and the width of the gap that the mystical experience needs to be able to overcome, the subject needs to become an abutment for the bridge. Only once every aspect is in place, no matter how peculiar and precarious the structure might seem, the definition of mysticism is complete – a coherent whole.

Unsurprisingly, research literature includes a lot of variety when it comes to typologies, classes, and categories of mystical experience. For example, a common practice is to distinguish between extrovertive experience that “looks outwards through the senses” and introvertive experience that “looks inwards into the mind” (Stace 1960, 61). The extrovertive experience includes the subject perceiving the ultimate Unity (the Object) shining through the multiplicity of the objects of external material (ibid.), while in introvertive experience, the senses are completely shut down and the One (the Object) and the subject's unity with it is perceived in the resulting darkness and silence (ibid., 62). Introvertive and extrovertive mysticism can and have been further divided into various types based on the content of the experience as well as the types of metaphysics involved. For example, Jones (2016, 33–34) distinguishes between nonduality, which is based on the introvertive mystical experience that involves the transcendent source of being and the corresponding oneness of reality,

and the extrovertive mystical experience, in which the seemingly separate entities of the phenomenal world share in the same oneness.

There is, of course, more variety in the literature, but the point is that no matter how mystical experiences are classified or categorised, they always include and are shaped by both the Object and the subject. At the same time, one's understanding of the nature of mystical experiences will in turn shape both the subject and the Object. Most significantly, there are two features of mystical experience that already James considered to be essential for an experience to be called mystical – ineffability and noetic quality:⁶

Ineffability. – The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.

Noetic quality. – Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.

(James 2004, 295)

Ineffability, even though it also appears in conversations outside the philosophy of mysticism, is something that makes mysticism unique and truly mystical. Depending on the specific configuration of the subject, the Object, and the mystical experience, ineffability is either the result of the gap between the subject and the Object or the source of the gap. Be that as it may, noetic quality is the soteriological bridge between the subject and the Object. Ineffability is introduced below, but the exploration of noetic quality remains outside the purview of this inquiry. However, even if it is not elucidated, the possibility for the coherence of mysticism is a result of the noetic quality of mystical experience, the actuality of mysticism. In other words, the coherent whole is an expression of the noetic quality of mystical experience.

Ineffability

Ineffability is most often considered to be an epistemological hurdle, something that prevents the mystic (the subject) from giving an adequate description of their mystical experience and/or its Object. This understanding of ineffability is as common as it is seemingly uncomplicated. A scholar can simply focus on what can and has been said – both mystics and scholars

of mysticism, after all, do speak and write a lot – and leave the ineffable that can't be known or spoken about in any way as confirmation of the mysticality of the phenomenon. As was alluded to earlier, this aspect of ineffability can also help circumvent some limitations and demands that are dictated by the principle of coherence, as it allows for connections to be made between different aspects of mysticism without the need to articulate or explain them – they are, after all, ineffable. However, the source or reason for ineffability should be identified, and whatever it is, it must itself adhere to the principle of coherence. In general, even if there is some philosophical room for variety, ineffability is likely to correspond with the transcendence of the Object, and in so doing, ineffability will determine or even become the gap that separates the subject and the Object.

However, even if it's rarely posed, there is the question of whether the above-mentioned partial ineffability is by itself coherent: is it even possible for something to be partially ineffable? If the Object's ultimacy or transcendence is the source of ineffability, how can it only be partial? In other words, accepting partial ineffability seems to entail that it possible to divide the Divine and end up with something that is only a slightly Absolute. This might not be a problem if one is willing to "dilute" the Object and concede that the experience is not of the Absolute but a mere shadow of it. While such a move will limit the Object and the overall scope of mysticism, it is still a valid point to make.

This problem is not often even recognised, perhaps because the alternative is seen as significantly more problematic. Embracing absolute ineffability ensures that nothing gets diluted. It safeguards the transcendence of God and the metaphysical independence of the Absolute. However, it will also subject the scholar to the full force of the paradox of ineffability that those who adopt partial ineffability can, at least partially, avoid. The paradox, in the simplest possible terms, is about how anything said about ineffability appears to immediately negate itself, tempting silence from both mystics and scholars alike. Such difficulties aside, absolute ineffability is no longer a mere epistemological hurdle that one can attempt to overcome by philosophical guile. Instead, it can and probably has to be elevated to become the source or essence of the Object.⁷

For now, it is enough to note how paradigmatic and significant these kinds of choices are when it comes to making sure that one's understanding of mysticism forms a coherent whole. A comparison here could be drawn between conceptions of the Divine that include divine ineffability and those that do not: between God and Godhead or between the Absolute of the philosopher and the God of the scriptures. Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that such hierarchy even makes sense, the more ineffable something is, the more transcendent it can be and vice versa. The more we say about something, the more it is bound by our words and concepts. For

the same reason, partial ineffability might risk becoming an oxymoron. Identifying the point of transition where something finite becomes infinite simply doesn't make sense, at least not easily. In other words, absolute ineffability and partial ineffability are incommensurable. Both can be part of mysticism, but the philosophical price tags and challenges that they come with are different.

In Summary

There is no philosophically plausible and valid mysticism without the subject, the Object and the mystical experience that form a coherent whole. The variety of mysticisms, including their scope and academic applicability, is a result of different configurations of the three categories and the aspects, features, and elements that they contain. The study of mysticism is full of variety, and the tripartite understanding of mysticism that I have proposed is a way to acknowledge and accept the variety as something inherent to the significance and depth of the subject matter of mysticism – an onto-existential encounter between an ordinary subject and the Absolute Object.

Moreover, the variety of mysticism validated by the principle of coherence offers a unique vantage point from which to view a rich variety of philosophical and theological landscapes (constituting metaphysical, epistemological, and existential aspects, elements, and features) that are included in one's understanding. Whether the Object is the Absolute, God, Truth, or something else worthy of its capitalisation. As part of a mysticism that forms a coherent whole, the Object can be understood as the ineffable end of the onto-existential relation between It and the subject. Perhaps most significantly, one's understanding of ineffability will not only determine the distance between the subject and the Object, but it will also shape the whole of mysticism, and the principle of coherence will be tested against the paradox of ineffability as well as the soteriological bridge that connects the subject with the Object.

Mysticism and Esotericism

In this part, mysticism is compared to and contrasted with the study of esotericism, a field of study that appears to share some interesting borders with the philosophy of mysticism. Similarly to the study of mysticism, there appears to be a lack of consensus within the study of esotericism on the exact boundaries and contents of the field (e.g. Hanegraaff 2013). Here, the focus is on two different points of contact along the borders shared by the two fields. The first one, a bit of a border dispute, is an approach to mysticism by Wouter Hanegraaff, who, with the presumed

support of Boaz Huss, challenges the usefulness of mysticism as an analytical category for the study of esotericism. In contrast, the second point of contact is a wide-open border crossing established by Glenn Alexander Magee's approach that considers mysticism to be essential for understanding esotericism.

As we explore their views, the main point is not whether one or the other approach is somehow better. It turns out that the mysticism that Hanegraaff is critical of does not form a coherent whole. Instead, what is abandoned is some kind of an academic phantom that does not exist within the philosophy of mysticism. While Magee's understanding of mysticism fits within the tripartite structure with ease, it also includes limitations and questions that lack a clear answer.

Mysticism vs. Esotericism

Hanegraaff's critique of mysticism as a useful category for the study of esotericism is especially interesting since the concept of gnosis that he offers as an alternative to mysticism (Hanegraaff 2011) appears to be a perfect example of mysticism as it is used within the study of mysticism, and well-suited for the understanding of mysticism proposed earlier in this chapter. Before looking into whether gnosis actually is mysticism, however, we need to take a few steps back and see what kind of mysticism is being replaced. Hanegraaff doesn't provide a clear definition of mysticism, but he makes a series of remarks and references that gesture towards a particular methodology and understanding of mysticism. Of course, it must be noted and emphasised that his critique of mysticism appears in the context of hermetic writings of late antiquity (some one and a half millennia earlier than the term "mysticism" appeared on the academic scene),⁸ and it is exactly in the context of historical research (in the study of esotericism) where he contests the usefulness of mysticism.

According to Hanegraaff, the study of mysticism in the 20th century has been dominated by the "hidden theological agenda" that there is one true mysticism, that of the Roman Catholic tradition, while "pagan and heretical" manifestations of experiential religion have been condemned to the status of *pseudomysticism* (Hanegraaff 2011, 157). Considering that the theological "agendas" that one can find in the philosophy of mysticism of the past two centuries are hardly dominant and never hidden, and I have never encountered any general category of *pseudomysticism*,⁹ the problem is unlikely to be philosophical in nature.

In his more recent work, Hanegraaff does offer a critique, albeit vague, that touches upon philosophy. When talking about special kinds of experiences ("altered states") and "noetic apprehension" in Plato's dialogues¹⁰ (Hanegraaff 2022, 187–193), he asks:

How do we interpret these famous passages? For modern readers it is very hard not to be led astray here by eighteenth- and nineteenth century constructs of “mysticism” and all their connotations, either of obscurantism and irrationality or of a trans-religious universality.

(*ibid.*, 191)

It is not clear how and why the modern reader – and more so, the scholar – is susceptible to 18th- and 19th-century constructs (or if and how they might lead to the hidden Catholic theological agendas of the 20th century), but the reference to trans-religious universality does gesture towards “perennialism” as being the problem with mysticism. This seems even more likely as Hanegraaff later connects “quasi-perennialist claims” with the “universal mystical experience” (*ibid.*, 255).

While his earlier critique seems to be about doctrines (theological agendas), Hanegraaff’s more recent critique seems to be about the nature of experiences (altered states and apprehensions). This is somewhat confusing since within the philosophy of mysticism, “perennialism” usually concerns doctrines rather than experiences, while “essentialism” claims that there is a universal, “common core” to mystical experiences (see, e.g., Jones 2021; Studstill 2005, 1–5). Be that as it may, a footnote (Hanegraaff 2022, 191; note 18) leads to Boaz Huss, whose critique does seem to be in sync with the above.

The Perennial Problem

The first thing to note is that Huss’ approach also conflates mystical experiences with mystical doctrines, which he includes in cultural and social phenomena labelled as “mystical” (Huss 2020, 17–26). This appears to be the result of a theological assumption and definition of mysticism according to which God, or “the absolute”, is the causal factor that stands behind the “texts and practices of the ‘mystics’ and the social movements initiated by them” (*ibid.*, 18–19). Furthermore, using Huss’ terminology, this theological assumption is part of both “perennial” and “contextual” approaches, and the difference is that perennialism assumes a universal mystical experience while contextualism assumes a universal object. However, Huss argues that beyond this theological assumption, scholars of mysticism have failed to establish any common traits that would allow for comparison (*ibid.*, 32) and that would validate mysticism as an analytical category.

Instead, the term mysticism creates “artificial affinity” between cultural products and social practices that do not have the common traits needed for academically valid comparison (*ibid.*). In summary, the problem seems to be that the ill-suited God and, or, transcendent reality as the object

of mystical experiences is a theological assumption and has only led researchers of mysticism – whether perennialists or contextualists – on a hopeless search for something that doesn't exist: a common denominator between “mystical phenomena” or the common essence of “mystical things” (ibid.).

My concern is that even if Huss initially recognises the centrality of the “question of the essence of the metaphysical object of the mystical experience and the nature of contact with it” (ibid., 16), his critique of mysticism ignores the question. The rich metaphysical and theological variety of the Object present in the study of mysticism, especially in the philosophy of mysticism, is reduced to a theological assumption (perhaps related to the hidden theological agendas Hanegraaff was concerned about) that the Object is a “causal factor of social and cultural phenomena” (ibid., 18). Furthermore, even if his assumption (of the theological assumption) might justify this for Huss in the specific context of his own (field of) research, not addressing the ineffability and the gap between the subject and the Object creates an artificial affinity between them and mystical phenomena. That is, without the whole onto-existential dimension of mysticism (even if only as it is understood by mystics and their traditions), the applicability of Huss' criticism in the context of the philosophy of mysticism is very limited.

However, Huss' more general concern that mysticism as an analytical category can sever cultural products and social practices from the historical and social contexts in which they occurred is certainly a valid concern, even if it is not universally applicable. With some confidence, I now presume that Hanegraaff's avoidance of mysticism is due to the concern that placing Hermetic spirituality and gnosis under the umbrella of mysticism would risk devaluing their uniqueness by creating artificial affinities between the context in which hermeticism was practiced and the Hermetica written and modern conceptions of mysticism, or, more specifically, the alleged 18th- to 20th-century constructions of mysticism that are infused with theological agendas, hidden or otherwise. My response to this is the same as my response to Huss.

Gnosis as Mysticism

As was mentioned earlier, the concept of gnosis that Hanegraaff offers as an alternative to mysticism turns out to be an excellent example of the kind of mysticism that one can find in the contemporary philosophy of mysticism:

the authors of the hermetic corpus assumed a sequential hierarchy of “levels of knowledge”, in which the highest and most profound

knowledge (gnosis) is attained only during ecstatic or “altered” states of consciousness that transcend rationality.

(Hanegraaff 2008, 128)

a special kind of salvific knowledge by which the soul could be liberated from its material entanglement and regain its unity with the divine Mind.

(Hanegraaff 2016, 381)

Hermetic practitioners believed that the horizon of human consciousness could not just be expanded but could be transcended altogether, resulting in those states of absolute knowledge and direct insight to which they referred as gnosis.

(Hanegraaff 2022, 3)

Even if the above quotes barely scratch the surface of what gnosis is – and Hanegraaff’s work on the topic is both extensive and rich in detail and depth – they are already enough to consider gnosis to be compatible with the understanding of mysticism that I presented in part one: The Object is the divine Mind and/or state of absolute knowledge; the subject is the soul of a hermetic practitioner regaining (lost) unity with the Object; the mystical experience is an altered state of consciousness that transcends rationality. From the point of view of the philosophy of mysticism, the mystical underpinning of gnosis is so obvious that to call it an alternative would be to exaggerate a difference that doesn’t even exist to begin with. For example, “the Source” (*pēgē*) – the absolutely unknowable highest level of hermetic reality – is no stranger, no less ineffable, nor more metaphysically ultimate or transcendent than the Object, the God(head), the One, or anything Absolute that has even the slightest bit of emanationist tendencies.

Hanegraaff emphasises that the *Hermetica* should not be read as a “philosophical” or “theoretical” text, his worry being that such an approach would “relativize, minimize, marginalize, or even wholly overlook dimensions that may be important or even central to the texts themselves but are hard to understand in terms of philosophical theories” (Hanegraaff 2022, 18). Instead, he uses “Hermetic spirituality” and argues that the philosophical and theoretical discussions about “the exact nature of God, humanity, and the cosmos” have a functional role for the spiritual practitioner and are subservient to the soteriological core message of the *Hermetica* (*ibid.*, 21).

However, does it mean anything to say that gnosis is a “state of absolute knowledge” without a philosophical foundation that explains what is a state of knowledge, let alone absolute knowledge? What is the academic

value of speaking about how to “restore the human spirit to its original condition of wholeness, divine consciousness, omniscience, even omnipotence” (ibid.) if one doesn’t also clarify what is meant by such (divine) attributes and how they are related to each other and the subject – the hermetic practitioner. It seems to me that it is wrong to claim that philosophy is somehow fundamentally opposed or incompatible with spirituality and the ineffability that is integral to understanding gnosis. Even if the authors of *Hermetica* answered such questions, the principle of coherence was as relevant then as it is now. There is no escaping its philosophical import. Furthermore, the philosophy of mysticism offers a way to approach gnosis (as mysticism) that does not relativise, minimise, or marginalise its soteriological core message, which as an onto-existential relation is very much at the centre stage. Moreover, the philosophy of mysticism can attempt to understand gnosis as a coherent whole – as “hermetic mysticism” – while not relativising, minimising, or marginalising the Object, the subject, or the mystical experience as they exist within hermetic writings.

I would argue that what is unique to Hermetic mysticism, gnosis, or any mysticism, is simply the unique configuration of the Object, the subject, the mystical experience, and the metaphysical, epistemological, existential, anthropological, soteriological, theological, mythical, and any such aspects, features, and elements they include. In addition, applying and acknowledging the principle of coherence helps make sure that nothing is missing or in the wrong place and that everything is commensurable with each other. This is also something that might help fill the gaps in ancient texts like the *Hermetica* if a part of it has been lost or misplaced during its transmission. The principle of coherence is bound to detect transmissional errors. Also, as a unique feature of mysticism, ineffability can be called to explain or patch up gaps in the coherence of the configuration since we simply can’t say why the Source does what it does. A lot has also been said throughout the long history of philosophy with regard to where the boundaries of the onto-existential dimension of mysticism might terminate/culminate. A lot more can also be said, perhaps, even regarding the unsayable. Boundaries are in place to be pushed and tested.

In summary, instead of being an alternative to mysticism, gnosis is a perfect, even inseparable companion to it; and vice versa, mysticism can be perfectly coherent with gnosis. There are no theological agendas, hidden or otherwise, that the scholar of mysticism (or of esotericism or religion) is forced to accept. The only agendas that one can and often should acknowledge are those held by mystics themselves and their traditions. The religious and socio-historical context, that is, perennialism, contextualism, constructivism, and any other “isms” that exist within the study of mysticism, are methodological tools to bridge the gap between our words and

the mysticisms of the past. At the same time, mysticism, be it perennial, essential, or otherwise, is present also here and now – the Absolute is no less Absolute now than it was for the authors of Hermetica, and the gap that separates the subject from the Object is no less deep and significant, and the principle of coherence no less valuable.

Mysticism as Esotericism

The second point of contact comes from Magee's introduction to *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* that begins with a declaration that treating esotericism and mysticism together is "ultimately necessary if either is to be truly understood" (Magee, 2016, xiii).¹¹ Whereas for Hanegraaff, gnosis was presented as an alternative to mysticism, for Magee it is its essence: "The essence of mysticism is to be found in the concept of gnosis ... a direct perception of the ultimate truth of what is. This knowledge was life transforming and impossible to adequately express in words" (ibid., xvi). Basically, mystical experiences are experiences of gnosis (ibid., xviii).

Just a few paragraphs ago, the problem with mysticism for Huss (and Hanegraaff, if I were to assign guilt by association; pun intended) was the theological assumption about God as the source of social and cultural phenomena, but for Magee, mysticism is about the source of all being:

All of the mystics – East and West – are concerned with knowledge of the transcendent source of all being, the object of gnosis. Since everything in our experience flows from this source, or owes its existence to it, the source itself cannot be understood in terms of the categories we employ in thinking or speaking about finite things.

(ibid., xvii)

It should be noted that here, metaphysical ultimacy comes with both perennial undertones and ineffability, the former criticised and the latter ignored by Huss.

It is somewhere around here, in the acknowledgement of something Fundamental and Ultimate¹² as "the Object" of mysticism – which I presume most philosophers of mysticism do – where the research path of a philosopher is likely to diverge not just from other scholarly approaches to mysticism but also from those of other philosophers.

Philosophy and Mysticism

What follows is a commentary on Magee's summary of "what is typically taught by the mystics – with the usual caveat that there are countless

variations and differences of emphasis” (ibid., xviii). For Magee, “mysticism’s peculiar logic” leads from the transcendent source of all being within which “all conceptual oppositions meet or are left behind” to a mystical teaching of all finite things being connected, “parts or aspects of a cosmic order – call it the Tao, the Logos, the Absolute” (ibid., xvii). However, as noted by Jones, “virtually every claim that mystics have advanced has also been advanced in nonmystical forms by nonmystics for philosophical reasons totally unrelated to mystical experiences” (Jones 2016, 174). That is, the ultimacy of the source of all being (the Object) needs neither mystics nor any peculiar logic of mysticism to lead it to metaphysical oneness, or, for that matter, to any other common metaphysical destination.

However, when the Object is accompanied by the subject and becomes an onto-existential relation, the metaphysics of mysticism can begin to deviate from the more common, nonmystical metaphysical paths. In this regard, Magee argues for a “perennial teaching” about the “fundamental identity between ourselves and the One”, and furthermore: “if the One/All is identical to the impersonal and universal soul of which each of us is finite inflection, then it would seem to follow that the being of all things is soul-like, or ensouled” (Magee 2016, xvii–xviii). Magee does not elaborate from where and how the impersonal and universal soul appears into the picture, but he is certainly correct in saying that if the Object is identical to the impersonal and universal soul – whatever that actually means – then the subject as finite inflection (an onto-existential relation) must adapt and be coherent with metaphysics that allow the One to be identical with something and inflect.

Magee acknowledges the ineffability of mystical experiences:

when the mystics tell us these things, they are attempting to put into words the ‘information’ conveyed wordlessly in the experience of gnosis. No such account can ever be fully adequate – yet the most brilliant writers and teachers among the mystics can give us a vivid glimpse.

(ibid., xviii)

This vivid glimpse, together with an understanding of a mystical experience that includes “basic components”, including descriptors such as “quality”, “sense”, “intuition”, and “feeling” (ibid.), indicate that Magee’s ineffability is of a very limited kind. At this juncture, the principle of coherence would request clarification of how these vivid glimpses are connected to the Object and what do they mean for the onto-existential relation, especially when they are “quite distinct from both thinking (in the sense of reasoning) and mundane sense experience” (ibid.). The point being made here is that the tripartite approach to mysticism can expose such

limitations and present questions that could help deepen and refine one's understanding of mysticism.

The Esoteric (Problem of) Mysticism

Instead of diving further into the metaphysics of mysticism, Magee expands mysticism by arguing that esotericism is founded on gnosis (and as we saw earlier, the essence of mysticism was also founded on the concept of gnosis) by connecting the mystical doctrine of oneness to an esoteric worldview to the idea “that existence is an interrelated whole in which seemingly dissimilar things exist in qualitative correspondence and vibrant, living sympathy” (Magee 2016, xxvii–xxix). The idea is interesting for sure, but, of course, whether and how the mystical or metaphysical oneness can contain vibrant living sympathy or qualitative correspondences and remain transcendent is not exactly an easy question to answer.

Magee presents the question whether esoteric practices could have a role in “leading one to gnosis”, but citing the complexity of the topic, he marks the question as a further area of inquiry (*ibid.*, xxxi). It is a complex topic indeed, but it does touch upon an interesting and pervasive problem with mysticism that I wish to address. It is really difficult to instill the mystical subject with any meaningful agency within mysticism. If some specific esoteric (or religious, spiritual) practice, ritual, or technique is given a formative role in the onto-existential relation between the subject and the Object, the principle of coherence would ask how and why the Object is susceptible to be influenced by something that occurs in this world. Any answer is more than likely to complicate the coherent whole. First, it endangers the transcendence of the Object in a similar manner to limited ineffability – the Object is diluted, pulled downwards from its metaphysical summit. Second, in relation to soteriology, there is something very problematic about reality (or, the Object) that has been designed as a soteriological puzzle that can be completed using some specific esoteric or mystical technique. It would not just pull down the Object from the summit, it might bring down the whole mountain.

At the same time, mysticism that doesn't acknowledge the subject who belongs to this world is not just problematic, it is meaningless. While the philosophy of mysticism can explore the deepest depths of the onto-existential relation within mysticism, the study of esotericism (and some other non-philosophical approaches to mysticism) might be much better equipped to understand and appreciate mysticism as a way of life. For example, the hermetic virtue of reverence (*eusebeia*) that Hanegraaff views as integral to Hermetic spirituality is an interesting and meaningful way to approach and acknowledge the subject in relation to the beauty of the unique mystery that mysticism (and gnosis) represents (see, e.g., Hanegraaff

2022, 195–196). The problem with purely philosophical mysticism is that it can all too easily abandon this world as it focuses on the one beyond. The study of esotericism and any approach that also embraces this world can, and perhaps should be, an integral part of one’s understanding of mysticism.

Conclusion: Mystical Ensemble

The academic study of mysticism is rich in both variety and depth. Even if the term “mysticism” itself is a modern invention, the subject matter of mysticism – a human encounter with the Ultimate – has always been part of philosophy. In contemporary scholarly use, “mysticism” has been understood and defined in a great many ways, and the resulting mystical variety within the academic study of mysticism can be confusing. In this inquiry, I have argued that this variety is not a problem, but a necessary result of the uniqueness of mysticism.

I presented an approach to mysticism that acknowledges this variety by allowing different kinds of understandings and configurations of mysticisms built from various aspects, elements, and features of mysticism placed under three categories: the Object, the subject, and the mystical experience. The main idea and motivation of my approach is threefold. First, the subject matter of mysticism is such that it should not and probably cannot be contained by any singular definition; all three categories are needed to form a coherent whole. Second, the required coherence not only ensures the validity of mysticism as a scholarly and analytical category, but it also reveals limitations and questions that require an answer. In other words, it helps the philosopher of mysticism, and to some extent any scholar of mysticism, to understand the kind of mysticism that one is dealing with – how each aspect of mysticism shapes the whole. Third, within academia, mysticism seems to have an image-problem that causes it to be either ignored or misunderstood. Hanegraaff’s and Huss’ attribution of theological agendas is an example of mysticism being misunderstood, at least from the point of view of the philosophy of mysticism. I hope that the approach to mysticism presented here can contribute to alleviating such misconceptions and inviting scholars of mysticism and esotericism to pay attention to the philosophy of mysticism.

I also believe that the study of mysticism can provide value outside of its own small corner within academia. As suggested by Magee, in addition to having an open border crossing with its close neighbour, the study of esotericism, mysticism should be able to establish mutually beneficial contacts with a variety of fields, especially within but not limited to those of philosophy and theology. Mysticism deals with some of the deepest and most

interesting philosophical and theological concepts, for example, the self and the Ultimate (God, Absolute, the One, Truth, or whatever the Object is), and with their onto-existential relation that includes both soteriology and the question of the meaning of mysticism. Significantly, not only does mysticism deal with such interesting topics and concepts, it does so from a unique vantage point that offers a view beyond its own borders.

Ultimately, mysticism is about the bridge and the gap between “the spirit of man, entangled as they declare amongst material things, and that ‘only Reality,’ that immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God” (Underhill 2004, 4). In all its contemporary variety, mysticism offers a unique way to understand and approach not just the effable subject and the ineffable Object but also the onto-existential relation that offers an endlessly rich area of research.

Notes

- 1 In general, “definition”, “understanding”, and “approach” are used interchangeably in this article, and a choice between them is either performative or an attempt to emphasise a particular aspect or point.
- 2 “Mysticism” is a modern term, and much of what we now call mystical traditions/religions didn’t themselves use such a label. See Jones (2016, x–xiii) and Huss (2020, 31–34) for very different takes on this “postmodernist” concern.
- 3 I use the term “onto-existential” to emphasise that mysticism has both a metaphysical and an existential dimension, and how any understanding of mysticism should, if not explain, at least acknowledge the presence of both.
- 4 The difference between “union” and “unity” is a good example of how theory-laden mysticism can be. Union retains some separation between the subject and the Object while unity has them sharing the same essence, being ultimately One.
- 5 There is some variety in how these conversations are described and labelled. The labels I have opted to use in this instance come from Jones (2020). A lot of words have been written to both describe and take part in these debates – especially the debate regarding the role of the subject in shaping the content of mystical experiences that is often (mis)labelled as being perennialism vs. constructivism. Instead of repeating what has already been said elsewhere, *ad nauseam*, I suggest that the interested reader should start from the very beginning, from Stace (1960) contrasted with Katz (1978).
- 6 James also added an interesting qualifier to his list of four “marks” (the remaining two being passivity and transiency) that is not often mentioned: the list was “for the purpose of the present lecture” (ibid., 294–295). This is especially relevant here since the tripartite structure of mysticism is all about the context, that is, how different configurations of mysticism can serve different purposes.

- 7 I have argued for absolute ineffability elsewhere (Piilola 2023). Here it is only presented as a possibility that is paradigmatic to understanding (tripartite) mysticism as a coherent whole.
- 8 Although Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s “mystical theology” was definitely in the temporal vicinity, and Neoplatonism with its strong henological undercurrents of mysticism was more or less a contemporary.
- 9 While some philosophers do consider some types of mystical experiences to be “higher” and more meaningful/significant than others, there is no consensus regarding any kind of hierarchy.
- 10 He mentions Symposium, Phaedrus, and Thætetus.
- 11 From the perspective of the philosophy of mysticism, this is an interesting claim as esotericism is rarely mentioned. For example, neither of the two major works that deal with the philosophy of mysticism in a general sense (Stace 1960 and Jones 2016) even have an index entry for esotericism. Even if the terms esoteric and esotericism might appear here and there, they are rarely if ever understood in the deep and nuanced sense in which scholars of esotericism use them. This doesn’t mean that such studies within the philosophy of mysticism don’t exist – in today’s fragmented and output-focused academia one can probably find anything and everything.
- 12 One can, of course, even deny the ultimacy, divinity, or any kind of metaphysical, theological, or even epistemological uniqueness of mystical experience. There is a plethora of worldviews and “isms” that do that by default, just as there are ones that necessitate them. While the naturalistic and psychological explanations for mystical experiences might be metaphysically inert, there is no doubt that the related phenomena are still interesting and offers both depths and challenges to cognitive study of religions, or any other scholarly approaches that find mysticism, even when stripped of the Object, relevant.

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4 (Meta-)Reflecting the Other

Peter Hamilton-Giles' Occult Philosophy

Adas Diržys

Introduction

Esotericism, as an aggregative concept, encompasses a wide range of different worldviews and belief systems. It constitutes a distinct set of ideas that typically necessitates a clearly articulated practical dimension. The demarcation between the theory and practice of esotericism is often meticulously outlined by both adherents and scholars. On one hand, we have conceptuality with different interpretations of what the world could be, while on the other, there is a pragmatic toolbox offering different methods of achieving envisioned goals. As we all know, such typological binaries rarely exist in reality. As one construct situated between these binaries, I propose the consideration of theory-practice,¹ which could define the function of theory as practice. Each member of this conjunction must be treated equally, without privileging theory over practice or vice versa. Furthermore, it intimates that theory embodies a particular practice, and conversely, practice embodies a particular theory. What are the implications of this for esoteric practice?² Despite the equality between theory and practice in theory-practice, I would like to emphasise a specific theoretical aspect that has sometimes been overlooked in the study of esotericism.

Considerable scrutiny has been directed towards the rationality of esotericism, yet comparatively less discourse has been developed to its inherent reflectivity. Consequently, significant efforts have been made to reposition esotericism within the realms of historical, social, and cultural realities by challenging constructs that categorise the esoteric phenomenon as irrational. Furthermore, I contend that reflection, as an integral aspect of the theoretical enterprise, assumes a pivotal role in esoteric practice. Certainly, it has been noted in numerous studies, such as Tanya Luhrmann's *The Persuasions of Witchcraft*, where she posits the heightened self-awareness among practitioners of magic (Luhrmann 1989, 342), and Egil Asprem's *The Problem of Disenchantment* which delves into Crowley's

occult training program and underscores his commitment to methodological naturalism (Asprem 2018, 522–523). These investigations suggest that esoteric practices often entail a degree of critical reflectivity. However, to distinguish my inquiry from existing scholarship, I shall briefly revisit the subject and introduce an additional term along with its definition.

A methodological distinction must be made between the two interlinked terms – reflection and meta-reflection. I will designate reflection as the representation of activity, and meta-reflection as the representation of reflection itself. To elucidate, let us consider an example drawn from the context of ritual magic: one aspect involves reflecting on how to enhance magical practices, while an entirely distinct aspect entails reflecting that the act of reflection itself constitutes a form of magic. Hence, it is imperative to discuss the theoretical aspect of esoteric practice while bearing in mind the crucial point that we will inevitably encounter practical elements as well. This convergence is encapsulated by the term theory-practice.

Therefore, without attempting to empirically verify the latter hypothesis by surveying every individual in the field of esotericism, I will endeavour to identify the outlier in the field – Peter Hamilton-Giles and his occult philosophy. Alongside an analysis of the case of esotericism, my objective is to elucidate the function that theory could serve in occult practice by introducing the concept of theory-practice and elucidating the role that (meta) reflection, as an aspect of theory-practice, could play in occult practice.

The Existence of “Traditional Witchcraft”

To discuss Hamilton-Giles, it is imperative to commence with the relatively underexplored phenomenon of “Traditional Witchcraft”. Despite its burgeoning presence, only a handful of scholarly studies have been conducted thus far,³ with the corpus of material continuing to expand and flourish. Noteworthy publishing houses contributing to its dissemination include *The Three Hands Press*, *Xoanon*, *Scarlet Imprint*, *Anathema Publishing*, *Theion Publishing*, and *Atramentous Press*.

Proponents who opt to employ the label “Traditional Witchcraft” primarily endeavour to differentiate themselves from the “Wicca” movement. The latter has recently come under scrutiny due to its modern orientation and the criticism it has received regarding historical authenticity. Instead, proponents of “Traditional Witchcraft” assert a connection to a pre-“Wiccan” tradition of witchcraft. Notable organisational bodies include Robert Cochrane’s *Clan of Tubal Cain* (often regarded as the forerunner of “Traditional Witchcraft”) and in Andrew D. Chumbley’s *Cultus Sabbati*. While Hamilton-Giles collaborated with Chumbley under the auspices of *Dragon’s Column* (resulting in the *Dragon Book of Essex*), he has never been affiliated with *Cultus Sabbati*. Since establishing

Atramentous Press in 2016, Hamilton-Giles has published a substantial body of works dedicated to expanding reflections on the philosophical and anthropological aspects of occultism and witchcraft. His publishing house has also brought together several authors with similar aims. However, Hamilton-Giles' publications are not merely theoretical endeavours but also practical manuals, wherein, I will argue, theoretical considerations constitute a form of occult practice.⁴ His ambitious undertaking requires readers to be acquainted not only with various esoteric currents but also to be prepared to discuss the intricacies of Ricoeur's conceptualisation of mimesis in narrative theory, Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness, or Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. Before delving into these nuances, it is essential to address the elephant in the room – the reality of “Traditional Witchcraft”.

In one of his recent excellent articles on “Traditional Witchcraft”, Ethan Doyle White has posed a question and concluded that discussing the reality of “Traditional Witchcraft” from an etic perspective is invalid; its true purpose can only be served through an emic nomination. He argues that claiming the reality of “Traditional Witchcraft” functions as a discursive strategy, primarily aimed at distinguishing it from “Wiccans” and invoking legitimacy through tradition (Doyle White 2018, 190). While not disputing the general tendency to view the reality of “Traditional Witchcraft” as employing a discursive strategy, I believe that we can still identify an etic usage of “Traditional Witchcraft”, provided we distinguish between its broader and narrower etic applications. Despite the predominantly discursive exhaustion of the term “Traditional Witchcraft”, there remain instances where the treatment of tradition itself differs. Chumbley, interviewed by Robert Fitzgerald, articulates his approach as follows:

“Sabbatic Craft” describes a corpus of magical practices that self-consciously utilize the imagery and mythos of the “Witches’ Sabbath” as a cipher of ritual, teaching, and gnosis. This is not the same as saying that one practices the self-same rituals in a self-same manner as the purported early modern “witches” or historically attested cunning folk, rather it points toward the fact that the very mythos that had been generated about both “witches” and their “ritual gatherings” has been appropriated and re-orientated by contemporary successors of cunning-craft observance and then knowingly applied for their own purposes.

(Chumbley and Fitzgerald 2010, 132)

From this quote, it can be observed that there is no straightforward binary decision regarding the existence or non-existence of a historical tradition. The latter division must be a prerequisite for the polemical discourse concerning the potential emergence of a historical witchcraft tradition,

which does not exist here. Chumbley acknowledges that the discourse surrounding the historicity of witchcraft not only brings forth mythical imagery but also involves the constructive interpretation of contemporary practices. The self-conscious recognition of the mythical nature of the witchcraft tradition diminishes the aim of legitimisation through tradition. Despite this, I aim to present an argument that can further broaden this perspective, incorporating self-awareness as a condition inherent in contemporary investigations into witchcraft.

The Investigations of Unknown

Hamilton-Giles can be situated philosophically within the realms of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Employing these methodologies, he endeavours to explore the experiential dimensions of occult practice and the formation of meanings associated with magic, the occult, and witchcraft. His aim is to delve into how these concepts have been historically understood and to identify any overlooked issues that may arise from deconstructing established constructs.

The phenomenological emphasis on the experiential dimension facilitates the development of a non-eliminative methodology capable of encompassing the experiences of occult practitioners, engaging not only with the known but also with the unknown. In addition to that, hermeneutics provides a framework for grappling with the process of interpreting concepts emerging from practical engagement. In this context, the meanings attributed to occult, magic, or witchcraft are not considered static but are rather understood as emerging from ongoing negotiations within a primary field of givenness.

Historical research into the history of magic, the occult, and witchcraft has amassed a significant amount of data, primarily focused on understanding what is explicitly present in texts or revealed through fieldwork investigations. Hamilton-Giles suggests that attention should also be directed towards what remains unsaid or unqualified, arguing that these absences and silences hold potential for practical approaches and should be the primary focus for practitioners.

In this discourse, Hamilton-Giles' perspective becomes intertwined between two networks: one representing the stance of a scholar, diligently extracting insights from existing data, and the other embodying that of a practitioner, actively engaging in the creation of new content rather than passively accepting established constructs.

What is particularly intriguing is that, through the amalgamation of these two perspectives, he also endeavours to establish a synthetic position by proposing a philosophical viewpoint capable of meta-reflecting on both stances. Consequently, neither position is essentialised; rather,

they complement each other. As a practitioner, he constructs a framework for advancing practical capabilities by encouraging individuals not to rest content with what others have already achieved. Meanwhile, as a scholar, he seeks to comprehend the process of conceptualisation and its underlying basis.

When a historian delves into esoteric texts, the primary focus typically centres on the text itself or the present discourse contained within it. However, the mechanism of production often remains overlooked, as the object or agent responsible for the text is frequently unknown. Here, I do not refer to the objective referent that can be readily discerned. Esoteric texts abound with metaphysical entities – angels, demons, elementals, and so on – that, in principle, elude empirical inquiry. Consequently, the object remains unanalysed and can only be described through the qualities ascribed to its constitution. Yet, the question persists: what motivates the practitioner?

Hamilton-Giles' occult philosophy exemplifies a perspective that delves into the inquiry of the unknowable and is oriented towards the proposition that the practitioner is inherently drawn to what cannot be epistemically known. Consequently, the aims of empirical investigators, if pursued in isolation, contradict the principles advocated in practice. However, is there still a perspective that can reconcile empirical understanding and its methodology with the pursuits of occult practice?

The Phenomenological Metaphysical

As commonly understood, phenomenology operates on the premise that rather than analysing the elusive “thing-in-itself”, it relies on what can be known or perceived – the realm of appearances. The concept of the “thing-in-itself” pertains to the metaphysical realm, which post-Kantian philosophical perspectives have deemed an unreliable foundation. Nevertheless, studies have demonstrated that the abandonment of what is referred to as dogmatic metaphysics – investigations focused on the uncritical instantiation of a particular entity from which further propositions are derived – was not the sole means by which the supernatural endured.

Modernity has been a complex undertaking, marked by ambivalence, wherein attempts to disentangle discourses from straightforward theological or mystical assertions have inadvertently spawned its own enchanted counterpart. As Peter Pels elucidates in his edited book, magic has the potential to undergo modernisation, serving as a counterpoint to the liberal conception of rationality. Furthermore, modernity not only encompasses magic but also engenders it, with the relationship between modernity and magic requiring analysis through the dialectics of revelation and concealment (Pels 2003, 3).

The naturalisation of reality has not been without consequences, and the effects have become evident relatively quickly. Post-Kantian philosophers such as Schelling, Eschenmayer, Carl du Prel, or Schopenhauer stand as examples of idiosyncratic thinkers for whom the supernatural was a central concern in their philosophical endeavours. Jason Å. Josephson Storm, in his work *The Myth of Disenchantment*, illustrates how the myth of disenchantment functioned as a guiding ideal throughout modernity, influencing numerous founding figures of the human sciences and their respective disciplines (Josephson-Storm 2017, 308–309).

However, while it remains possible to empirically identify instances where the supernatural is still considered a viable option theoretically, methodologically there has been a shift in trajectory. Rather than simply positing reality as inherently supernatural, later philosophers were influenced by Kant's critical method, which can be interpreted as an endeavour to naturalise phenomena previously considered beyond the scope of scientific inquiry. This inclination towards naturalisation, aimed at expanding the epistemic domain to encompass both the known and the unknown, laid the groundwork for the inclusion of metaphysical phenomena within the realm of appearances, subsequently evolving into phenomenology.

Undoubtedly, I am not advocating for phenomenology's alignment with the supernatural (and any potential esoteric influences among the discipline's founders would require further investigation). Rather, my focus lies on the inherently open-ended nature of the phenomenological method, which enables the questioning and integration of phenomena that have traditionally been marginalised or excluded from the realm of experience. Visions, trance states, evocations, and invocations – common elements of ritually induced experiences – necessitate explanation, even if their ontological status cannot be empirically measured.

Returning to the question of the metaphysical, the phenomenological position does not inherently reject the possibility of its existence. There exists a distinction between affirming the possibility of knowing the metaphysical itself and understanding the metaphysical as it appears to us. The complete elimination of the metaphysical would imply that it lacks any meaningful significance, which is contrary to the situation at hand. When we refer to something as metaphysical, it is evident that we are acknowledging its existence beyond our immediate comprehension or grasp.

Therefore, the phenomenological reformulation of the question could be framed as follows: how does the metaphysical manifest itself to us? It is worth noting that phenomenologists have not remained indifferent to this inquiry. Examples include Husserl's analysis of hyle and the problem of the appearance of appearance, Sartre's ontology of being-in-itself, Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the flesh, Fink's meontics, and Schnell's recent discovery of Husserl's constructive phenomenology. These

instances illustrate the inability to evade the question of the metaphysical, even when prioritising the transcendental conditioning of appearance.

For Hamilton-Giles, the metaphysical represents one of the primary binaries that are considered alongside the physical when detailing the experience of occult practice. The emphasis on the phenomenological position is crucial here because, for him, the metaphysical is not merely accepted as a given but is always engaged in a confrontation with what becomes manifest. If the metaphysical is something that cannot be directly known – since only what appears in experience is knowable – then the question regarding the metaphysical must be framed as an inquiry into how something that cannot appear nonetheless manifests itself.

As an occult practitioner engages with entities that elude empirical inquiry,⁵ the ontological question subsists in any case: what is the existence status of a supernatural entity? However, through the phenomenological perspective, Hamilton-Giles contends that the question of existence becomes naturalised. Rather than asserting the direct postulation of an entity and its existence, he views the occult realm as a dimension primarily concerned with the metaphysical, which remains beyond comprehension based on its constitution:

Not passing for the non-descript, the appearance of the extraordinary depends on accentuating the potentiality of the hidden by reflecting aspects of the living world. How the observer comes to know this world involves the forming of a bond between a perceived physical presence and a disembodied metaphysical absence. Rather than safely relying on an appearance that generates a mild impression, the transformative quality of this Otherness which defies absolute definition, appears before the viewer in contorted form and thus gives the absence a discernible presence.

(Hamilton-Giles 2013, 9)

The binary distinction between the physical and the metaphysical can be reconceptualised as the duality of presence and absence. Presence denotes what is observable and lays claim to existence, while absence pertains to the lack of presence and existence, delineated by a realm of potentialities. Remarkably, absence, despite its non-manifestation, can possess a form of presence. It is characterised by Otherness, a quality that defies complete encapsulation; otherwise, absence would transition into presence. This disruptive nature of Otherness unsettles the established totality of knowledge, introducing a new dimension to our understanding.

The introduction of Otherness and its fundamental presentation resonates with Levinas' interpretation of the concept. The Other serves as the cornerstone for prioritising ethics over other philosophical disciplines,

prompting a re-evaluation of one's relationship with the Other, who is fundamentally different from oneself. The isolating nature of the Self fosters a mode of knowledge subsumed under totalisation, where everything known is governed by analytical laws, precluding the emergence of novelty. It is only through engaging with the Other that the possibility of re-evaluating existing knowledge arises.

The Other compels us to reconsider our isolation and engage with a reality or metaphysical realm that transcends solipsistic boundaries. In essence, it interrupts the continuous flow of existence to transform the subject into an authentic agent, necessitating further action and engagement.

It is worth noting that despite Hamilton-Giles' assertion regarding the unique nature of occult inquiry concerning the relationship between physical presence and metaphysical absence, this structural framework can be generalised to encompass the broader structure of knowledge acquisition. When new content emerges into actuality, it initially manifests as something previously absent, transitioning from absence to presence. This move towards generalisation is crucial to bear in mind, as it may prove useful for future considerations.

The Absence of the Object

It is crucial to emphasise the dialectical interplay between presence and absence, which are regarded as the primary constituents of the occult practitioner's reality. Typically, when questioning the possibility of knowing something beyond ordinary discourse, the focus tends to be on providing a factual explanation of how that something can be known and how its existence can be validated. Following this line of reasoning, the practice of occult practitioners is often perceived as primarily concerned with the question of presence.

However, Hamilton-Giles proposes a different perspective, suggesting that instead of viewing occult practice as concerned with what is present, it should be regarded as an endeavour to comprehend what is absent. I will further elaborate on this assertion. If we posit the existence of beings – or make statements about such beings – that do not conform to conventional beliefs (for instance, ghosts), the practitioner's objective is not necessarily to argue for their existence or to assert their presence despite prevailing scepticism. Rather, the focus lies in seeking a potential resolution to the question: if these entities are absent, how can they be known?

Here we encounter the classical (meta)ontological debate between proponents of Meinongianism and Quine's successors (Berto and Plebani 2015, 100). The question arises: can a statement about the existence of a non-existent object be meaningful? This debate can be enriched by incorporating a phenomenological framework. Even if the metaphysical realm,

as it exists in itself, remains beyond direct apprehension and knowledge, what is considered metaphysical nonetheless pertains to the realm of phenomena. Therefore, what exists, as it appears to us, is subject to further inquiry.

However, what about objects that do not exist? It is essential to recognise that we are discussing the realm of phenomena. Within this framework, the absence of existence does not equate to non-appearance. For instance, while the metaphysical in itself may not manifest directly, a phenomenon such as its non-existence can still be a component of our understanding of reality. To illustrate further, consider the experience of observing an empty mug. We do not posit that it is filled with invisible oxygen qualities; rather, our experience of emptiness is significant. Moreover, we can envision the potential for the mug to be filled with various liquids or materials, thus ceasing to be empty.

When Hamilton-Giles discusses the potentiality of absence, it seems that he is referring precisely to the possibility of embodiment, allowing something absent to become present. He suggests that what is absent can be found anywhere, as every form of presence is guided by something not immediately manifest, and the magician seeks to explore these possibilities.

However, it is important to note a certain distinction: the investigation of the possibilities of absence is not solely aimed at actualising them, but rather focuses more on existing in the intermediary state between absence and presence. This dynamic relationship enables the experience of distortion and elucidates the mechanism by which distortion occurs. While the absent object may be brought into the present, the absence of its possibility must remain within the realm of knowledge. In other words, the practitioner can be considered an explorer of the unknown, particularly concerned not with how something could exist, but with how something that does not exist intervenes in our ordinary reality. What is absent always transforms into something present, but the movement between these two spheres remains a primary concern for those engaged in occult inquiry.

The Potentiality of the Other

The concept of absence does not exist in isolation within Hamilton-Giles' occult philosophy; it must be understood in conjunction with the notion of Otherness or the Other. This concept is crucial for his framework and can be contextualised within the history of philosophy, particularly through its prominence in Levinas' phenomenology. In the context of occult inquiry, where the focus is on apprehending what is absent rather than what is

present, the Other represents a broader reference point where absence is situated.

The Other, being distinct from the Self who engages in inquiry, disrupts the established field of perception by introducing the problem of absence alongside what is present. It encompasses various forms, such as missing fragments in texts, abandoned places, or individuals who are no longer present. The Other carries an inherent ambivalence – it has the potential to exist but does not necessarily reveal itself, thus embodying both being and non-being.

Hamilton-Giles elucidates the multifaceted nature of the Other through the example of perceptions surrounding death: “The illusive perception of death and the imagined bond between the living and the dead floods the mind with boundless wonders. From these, the ontic relationship between hidden and revealed worlds provides an opportunity to perceive Otherness as a pan-ontology” (Hamilton-Giles 2022c, 15). When contemplating death, the absence of presence invokes images of presence while being anchored in the prominent absence associated with death. This liminal space between presence and absence aligns with the territory of the occult practitioner, where the invisible and non-representable serve as catalysts for imagination and creation of alternative possibilities.

It is significant that the author suggests understanding the relationship between the esoteric and the exoteric as opening a field of “Otherness as a pan-ontology”. Here, the Other is not viewed as a stable and substantial entity but rather as a pluralistic and dynamic process, wherein dialectics between what is and what is not instantiate an in-between potentiality.

The Dialectics Between the Other and the Self

Indeed, the occult practitioner cannot fully immerse themselves in the Other without risking immediate extinction. They must maintain a stable centre, which Hamilton-Giles identifies as the constitution of the Self. His perspective on this matter is best articulated through the following quote:

While many might regard the use of the term Self as an abstracted version, detached and thus illogical, for the occult philosopher the capitalisation of the same term transcends the everyday connotation to one where the Self is made into the dialectic correspondent for the orientation of mystery and magic. As such, the term acknowledges the accumulation of a particular type of knowledge that is only ever available within a very specific paradigm. The Self is then presented as the allocative character through which intention-meaning is given new purpose. What makes this particularly interesting for us is that it is the allocation

of position accompanied by the immanence of meaning which causes the capitalisation of the S. Semantically this holds incredible importance for the practitioner because it is a statement about constitution.

(Hamilton-Giles 2018, 44)

Whereas the Other infuses the field of inquiry with an inherent ambiguity of meaning, it could also be argued that, in this context, it undermines the very possibility of meaning. Similar to possessing a quality of absence, which inherently opposes presence, the Other renders a certain meaning incomplete, as it encompasses an abundance of potential meanings that necessitate something beyond itself for realisation. The Self emerges as an agent of sense-making, equipped with the primary tool of attention, through which specific meanings are discerned amidst the flux of difference. This concept is echoed in Damon Zacharias Lycourinos' examination of contemporary magic practitioners, who, employing phenomenological methods, emphasise the significance of ritual settings in facilitating a somatic mode of attention (Lycourinos 2018, 168–169). As Hamilton-Giles observes, the Self becomes intricately entwined in a dialectical interplay with the Other. It is crucial to note that the meaning that emerges is also an expression of the subject's intention, thus rendering this process of communication between the Other and the Self inherently magical. The act of transforming absence into presence or imbuing meaning into what was previously devoid of it is depicted here as a form of transubstantiation. The Self assumes the role of the occult practitioner, tasked with transcending the mere instantiation of meaning-intention and delving into the mechanics of transformation by actively engaging in the process.

Given the phenomenological underpinnings of Hamilton-Giles' occult philosophy, it is crucial to recognise that the dialectics between the Self and the Other should not be confined solely to somatic positioning. The Self is not entirely distinct from the Other and not only renders absence present but also harbours a certain absence within itself. It is not immune to the influence of the Other, as the Self, like the Otherness, is characterised by a plurality of meanings and the potential for alternative interpretations, contributing to the esoteric discourse and initiation process. Hamilton-Giles elucidates the formation of the Self by stating: “by operating as an indicative, attention marks the moment when the witch appears and delivers to the Self the metaphysical agency found in the disembodied Otherness of the subject” (Hamilton-Giles 2018, 18). Consequently, the Self emerges from the realm of Otherness.

Consider, for instance, the pivotal moment of an occult practitioner's oath-taking. This decision involves a deliberate process of self-transformation, where the aspirant consciously embraces a new identity and aligns themselves with the esoteric worldview. With this transformative decision, the

individual assumes a new identity imbued with meanings inherited from established traditions and knowledge. This process of identity transformation initiates the Self into a dialectical relationship with the Other, albeit one that remains open-ended and in need of further meaning-making through the journey of self-realisation.

The Case of I-Reflective

I have already introduced the concepts of the subject and the object that Hamilton-Giles uses in his explorations of occult practice, but the matter concerning the subject is a little bit more complex than this. With the concept of the Self, it is clear how the primary interaction is presented, but there are more levels to how the subject is constituted. It is not only the passive recipient of the data that comes from the Other but must also be seen as an operator capable of intervening in the construction of reality.

Typically, within esoteric discourse, emphasis is placed on the experiential and practical dimensions, while the role of theory or reflection is often relegated to a secondary status or deemed subordinate to immediate experiential insights. By augmenting the characteristics ascribed to the subject, Hamilton-Giles elucidates how cognitive faculties become intertwined with occult practice, thereby offering insights into what may be construed as a theoretical integration with practical perception, a phenomenon herein referred to as theory-practice. The secondary level of the subject, denoted as “I-reflective” by Hamilton-Giles, is explicated as follows:

How we come to comprehend depends on being able to recognise those aspects which have further pertinence. Accepting them as temporary referential markers allows the imagination to elaborate upon already existing significances. This is the purpose of the I-reflective, as a vessel for transcending time it operates by overwhelming oppositional knowledge by negotiating with the veneer of “now”, which means for us that the inherent positionality of the I-reflective can assign greater importance to the crossroads due its capacity of exceeding the moment.

(Hamilton-Giles 2022c, 16)

It could be posited that I-reflective⁶ emerges as a function of the subject when the process, as elaborated here, becomes apprehensible. I-reflective serves as the tool that scrutinises the entire structure of the Self, perceiving it in relation to the Other and acknowledging its potential to engage in this interactive process. It possesses the capacity to analyse the distinct constituent elements originating from the Other and those inherent within the Self, thereby engaging in a negotiation that constitutes the primary focus

of the occult practitioner. As another facet of the subject with the Self as its foundational backdrop, it could be observed that I-reflective also harbours an intention to furnish apparatuses enabling the concentration of attention on the present moment. Consequently, it functions as an intervention by discerning elements traversing the realm of possibility, with I-reflective further endowing the ability to perceive the tensions inherent in oppositions. In this manner, I-reflective evolves into a transcendent operator that simultaneously embodies immanence through the Self.

I-reflective is a mirroring instance of the vastness of the Otherness and its unrepresentable capabilities, as Hamilton-Giles comments upon:

Being aligned to the crooked path along with many aspectual engagements reveals to the wayfarer the sorcerer standing before the void as master to all transgression. The I-reflective beholds this variable expression of Being because of the amalgamated work which has already occurred. In its singularity with diversity, the I-reflective encapsulates the core primary, which is to facilitate congress with the Gods, Demons and Spirits of Otherness. It is through these terms of engagement that we use the sorcerous lexicon to make reflexive judgements about what constitutes sameness and Otherness.

(Hamilton-Giles 2022c, 25–26)

This theorisation in no way diminishes the experiential importance of occult practice but rather accompanies it with an explanation of how awareness of the different components of occult practice could be grasped through theory-practice. Only irreducible reflection allows for distinguishing between the perceptual and cognitive knowledge with which occult practitioners come into contact. Reflection could aid in understanding how the Otherness introduces a different mode of existence, thereby expanding the possibilities for engagement with the practitioner. By acknowledging the structure of occult practice, attention is drawn to the distinctly discerned entities and presences that emerge from absence.

Moreover, the role of judgement facilitated by reflection is not solely oriented towards particular essences but is also directed towards understanding the constitution of sameness and Otherness, as well as their boundaries. To differentiate between these two inherent moments of I-reflective, two different terms will be employed to describe this process. The ability to judge particular instantiations, making them present and thereby determining them, will be termed reflection, as previously utilised. Conversely, the ability to assess the entire process of structuring according to the categories of sameness and Otherness will be referred to as meta-reflection.

Regarding reflection, it is evident that what is judged is a particular representation. In the case of meta-reflection, however, what is judged is the process of representation, or representing the representation. Thus, it necessitates treatment as a second-level reflection.

The Meta-Reflection of Narratives and Images

The role of meta-reflection in occult practice considers the plural structure of Otherness, acknowledging the various possibilities that have previously been underexplored. The history of witchcraft, occultism, and esotericism, in general, is replete with diverse narratives and depictions of how individuals within those domains have been perceived. From stories of persecution to narratives of emancipation, from being part of counterculture movements to being viewed as messiahs heralding a new era, these imaginings have persisted through the ages, often intertwining with each other and evolving into entirely new discursive understandings.

Engaging with this material entails more than simply accepting it as given; it involves delving into what remains unsaid or overlooked. By reflecting on the history of images, we encounter varied representations of what constitutes the narrative of witchcraft or esotericism. With the introduction of meta-reflection, the process of conceptualisation itself and the construction of images become discernible. It becomes apparent that all figures involved in this field are not merely manifestations of inherent existence but are instead constructed through processes of representation. For historians, studying art history, for instance, reveals reflections of local socio-cultural realities expressed through visual imagery, as noted by Sigrid Schade (Schade 2020, 352). However, for occult practitioners, the dynamic evolution of images associated with investigative subjects suggests the presence of an Otherness that is not static or governed by sameness, but rather provides an interpretative capacity that can be practically utilised as theory-practice.

The involvement of the Other in shaping narratives establishes a distinction between what is present and what is absent, implying the potential for alternative perspectives and questioning the assumed understanding of occult practice. This underscores the importance of epistemological exploration for practitioners, enabling them to investigate realms that have been overlooked.

Another method of philosophical inquiry, hermeneutics, becomes invaluable for Hamilton-Giles' further investigations. Hermeneutics, as is well-known, is a philosophical discipline concerned with the understanding of interpretation, which inevitably serves as a tool for scholars. This is because every text or narrative not only presents a particular interpretation

of an event but also necessitates a second-level interpretation of how the process of interpretation is articulated within it.

The history of esotericism and esoteric studies has primarily been navigated by historians tasked with unravelling the meanings embedded within esoteric texts and their contextual underpinnings within social, political, or cultural movements of their time. Various studies indicate that esotericism is intertwined with distinct constructive mechanisms of legitimisation (Kilcher 2010). Among these, one notable strategy is the construction of tradition, which facilitates the association of esoteric subjects or movements with a myriad of earlier instances of esoteric thought. For example, the narrative of Hermes Trismegistus as the progenitor of the Hermetic tradition was utilised by Renaissance Platonists to assert the existence of a perennial wisdom dating back to the era of Moses, or even preceding him. Similarly, modern Rosicrucian manifestos have established various secret societies, claiming a lineage tracing back to early occult orders. Furthermore, as noted by G.J. Wheeler, discovery narratives have served to emphasise the significance of certain essential roles and their capacity to convey higher truths (Wheeler 2019, 355). Thus, it becomes evident that the history of esotericism is characterised by constructive procedures and the utilisation of narrative potentials.

The tools of hermeneutics, within the context being considered, hold significant value as they become an integral component of meta-reflection. Meta-reflection not only discerns different representations but also reflects upon the differential structure of these representations and investigates the process by which they come into existence. Here, we observe the intertwining of *emic* and *etic* perspectives. The historian, examining resources containing various narratives, does not view them as static materials that rigidly essentialise one image over another. Instead, they recognise the evolving nature of these narratives and the constructive framework within which they operate.

Similarly, the occult practitioner, as elucidated by Hamilton-Giles, must comprehend the constructive aspect of their work, which is primarily rooted in the process of conceptualisation. Understanding something is contingent upon its interpretation, and this holds true for both scholars and practitioners. However, their objectives differ. From an *etic* perspective, the researcher seeks to understand the influencing processes behind narratives and images, while from an *emic* perspective, the practitioner delves deeper, seeking to unearth the implicit, the unsaid, and integrating it into their practice. As Hamilton-Giles aptly comments:

This transformation into something new and virile presents opportunities for exploring the relationship between the physical and meta-physical realities as perceived by the practitioner. Any such connection

between the present and past has to overcome the vacancy caused by the passing of time. This vacancy normally manifests through lack of knowledge, or the belief that knowledge has been partially or totally lost, yet engaging with the possibility of becoming causes the distance between there and here to become unstable, thus allowing for the emergence of new processes and principles.

(Hamilton-Giles 2017, 36)

For the occult practitioner, the Otherness of changing potentialities serves as a signifier of the metaphysical. To simplify for pragmatic purposes, the scholar is concerned solely with the physical realm or what can be investigated empirically and presented to them, while for the practitioner, this physical aspect is accompanied by the metaphysical status of Otherness. It is important to note that this Otherness is not fixed into a specific state but rather guided by the notion of being capable of varying and symbolising this particular aspect of reality. As previously mentioned, what is absent as metaphysical must maintain a relational status with what is present, and this intermediary state becomes the focal point of occult practice. Therefore, the constructive nature of narratives and images can only be understood, and new insights discovered, within the gap where the physical and metaphysical, or presence and absence, intersect.

From the dynamic relationship between what is different and what is the same, new meanings emerge regarding potentialities. The stability and givenness of the known are challenged by the indeterminate realm of the Otherness, which introduces the potential for alternative states and destabilises the certainty of our knowledge. Michael Taussig suggests that magic is effective not only in masking but also in unmasking, revealing that it has the capacity to uncover more than it conceals (Tausig 2003, 273). When confronted with the manifestation of the unknown alongside the known, or when the limits of our knowledge are reached, the occult practitioner embarks on his quest.

The Examples of Image Constructions

Abstract argumentation may veer away from the practical embodiment of this process in the life of the occult practitioner. Therefore, it is worthwhile to contextualise this discussion and explore a few examples, as presented by Hamilton-Giles. The first example pertains to the image of the witch as an outsider:

Even at a time where the belief in the witching spectacle was more present than during our own, the witch was already being removed, by being placed into a position of remoteness, beyond the boundaries

of village and therefore secular life. And it could be argued it was at this outpost that the witch became the quintessential Other to the population's Being.

(Hamilton-Giles 2017, 107)

The portrayal of the witch as a figure removed from ordinary life and deemed undesirable is well-documented, evidenced by the numerous accounts collected from Inquisition confessions and the narratives constructed by demonological treatises. Over time, this image permeated social circles, fostering fear of individuals purportedly communing with malevolent forces. Such depictions illustrate how the presentation of the witch epitomises Otherness and is perceived as existing in a relationship with the Other. It is not merely the act of communication that is significant here, but also the inherent potential for disruption encapsulated within the witch herself, as she is construed as something Other, capable of upending established norms and orders.

Another example is oriented not towards a specific image of the occult practitioner but rather towards the object with which the practitioner engages, highlighting the prevalent Otherness within it:

Form, when it comes to occupying metaphysical space, generates a distorted version of everyday affairs, we see this in how it disarticulates itself from what we know to be true. For example, the Baphomet is depicted as a goat, though neither the goat nor the Baphomet operate in any meaningful way without them bearing some relation to each Other.

(Hamilton-Giles 2023a, 25)

The classic example of the figure of Baphomet, as explained by Hamilton-Giles, serves as a particular instantiation of form. But what does it mean to situate it within the metaphysical realm? How can form be understood as metaphysical? An understanding of this can be gleaned by recalling the leading phenomenological method, which treats meaning as also being metaphysical. In this context, Baphomet can be seen as representing the form of Otherness, symbolising the metaphysical territory of investigation and disrupting the ordered structure of presence.

What is known presents itself as physicality, from which the image of Baphomet is constructed, typically depicted as a goat. The introduction of metaphysical Otherness to the physical form extends beyond the primary image of a goat, distorting it into something else or actualising one of its latent potentialities by drawing upon absence. However, as the author contends, neither a goat nor Baphomet can function in isolation; they rely on a relational context. This underscores the intermediary nature of their

existence, emphasising the interconnectedness between the physical and the metaphysical dimensions.

Furthermore, formal considerations are not devoid of social implications. As Julian Strube demonstrates, Éliphas Lévi,⁷ the creator of the Baphomet image, sought to realise his socialist ambitions by initiating occultists into a tradition represented by Baphomet, aiming to establish a perfect social order through this occult practice (Strube 2016, 73).

From these examples, it is evident that form, as the constructive nature of an image or narrative, is not merely a fixed instantiation but rather a reflection of the potentiality and capability to be understood in various ways. This understanding should not be seen as a unidirectional process but rather as a dynamic interplay that serves as input for the emergence of all other determinations.

The interpretation of a given image is reconstructed or reinterpreted through a process of questioning the givenness of the images and narratives. However, this interpretation is not an isolated phenomenon. It is intricately intertwined with a complex web of meanings that have existed in the past, currently exist, and may be proposed in the future. Therefore, by altering the interpretation and the meanings associated with a particular instantiation, the entire field of contexts with its own set of meanings is transformed as well. For example, when the image of the witch as an out-cast⁸ is reinterpreted, it may influence the social dynamics within the community. Similarly, when viewed through the lens of Baphomet, an ordinary goat would be perceived differently. The field of meanings is not static; it is constantly evolving and changing, thus distorting reality by making previously non-existent absences present.

The Role of Time in Perception

The act of conceptualisation and interpretation is not confined within a temporal vacuum but is instead situated within the context of past, present, and future. Hamilton-Giles, drawing from Husserl's understanding of intuition, emphasises the significance of retention and protention in the formation of the sorcerous act:

Certainly, for Husserl perception rests on intuition, whereas an alternative argument might suggest it is our perception of the object which facilitates intuition. From a sorcerous standpoint, I think the latter is a better perspective to adopt because the perceived object personifies the integrity of our subjectivity in a much more meaningful way than it does with Husserl's approach. The reason why this is the case is due to our perception and the making of the perceived object, which is never entire, rather the indistinctness of what cannot be seen, or for that matter

perceived, creates moments where our intuition fills those prevailing absences with meaning. In a sense, intuition is the non-articulation of retentive modifications, and when combined with protentive possibility generates capacity that can be relayed to another. Communication is therefore an implicit aspect of intuition, whereas perception occurs regardless of our intention.

(Hamilton-Giles 2022b, 70–71)

Hamilton-Giles reconfigures the primacy of intuition, initially attributed to the act of perception by Husserl, to the perception itself. In doing so, he affords a broader significance to the intervention of the metaphysical, which can initiate a shift in the subject's perception. In this framework, the Self is the entity touched by the object, responsible for imbuing it with intuitive content during the act of perception.

As demonstrated, Otherness is implicated within the object, and its inherent absence necessitates filling it with a certain presence of meaning. Where does the dimension of time intersect in this process? It could be posited that time is intricately linked with the subject through the instantiation of the Self as the attention-gathering apparatus. The Self measures the present moment, while also encompassing what is past (retentive qualities) and what is future (protentive qualities).

In exploring the retentive qualities of the past, it must be recognised that this is not a passive instance but rather influenced by what is already known to the subject, both individually and collectively. Individual memory comprises specific images derived from daily interactions, while collective memory encompasses images instilled by preceding generations – a cultural memory that shapes the subject's understanding.

In considering the question of time, it is crucial to emphasise intersubjectivity. The past is not solely constructed by the individual subject from their present interactions; rather, it is inherited from the culture to which the subject belongs. Other subjects also contribute to the construction of cultural meanings, forming a background against which individual subjects encounter additional meanings. Interpretative fields, or fields of meaning, are instantiated within culture, and individuals negotiate these meanings with those derived from their own experiences.

This exposition helps clarify Hamilton-Giles' statement that "intuition is the non-articulation of retentive modifications". Intuition, by not reflecting upon meanings gathered from previous instances, operates as an immediate tool that fills present gaps in perception using past data. Protention, meanwhile, facilitates the connection between the object and its potential field of meanings. All of these moments situate the subject between past and future, instantiated in the present by their actions.

From this discussion, it becomes evident that intuition plays a significant role in the act of perception, providing input to the subject through the object as the Other signifies content and acts as an intermediary in communication. However, communication can take on articulated or non-articulated forms, with the former involving reflection. Additionally, communication can be reflected through its representations, which are imbued with intuitions, or the process of communication itself can become the object of reflection. In the former case, as previously noted, reflection emerges, while in the latter case, meta-reflection is involved in the constitution. Both of these components are observable in the theory-practice of the occult practitioner.

By reflecting, he observes how different images and narratives emerge and conducts his inquiry accordingly within the local instantiation of its ritual zone. The questions that arise from reflective consideration include what tools are required for successful evocation and which dates correspond with the objects invoked. These inquiries stem from the tradition, perception of the Other, and the aims directed towards future results.

In his examination of the cognitive processes behind the ritual practices of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Egil Asprem divides the magician's training program into three steps: "1) Internalization of esoteric concepts, representations, and event schemata; 2) practice of meditative techniques focused on attention, bodily posture, concentration, and mental imagery; 3) development of new self-representations (self-models)" (Asprem 2017, 21). These foundational elements could be associated with the reflective stage of occult practitioners' reality. Through meta-reflection, the practitioner reflects on the process itself, considering how it could be generally coordinated.

By reflecting upon the process of conceptualisation itself, and by making something absent in the present, the practitioner introduces self-awareness into its practical ramifications. This highlights that conceptualisation is the primary mechanism by which knowledge of the world is determined.

Concluding Remarks

Through the analysis of Hamilton-Giles' occult philosophy, it can be observed that he presents a specific perspective on the understanding of theory and practice, which I term as theory-practice. The significance of reflecting on practical workings is explained accordingly:

Some might ask, "why should any of this matter when working the crooked path", the point being made here is that it is impossible to effectively work the path unless one understands how we go about constructing the appropriate interface between various states of Being

and non-being. As has already been shown, it is simply not enough to blindly accept what another has told you, the correct response when partaking in knowledge is to explore the intricacies that are helping you to deconstruct the given. We can even extend this further by noting it is the duty of the sorcerer to deconstruct givenness, to not assume the sanctuary of knowledge is enough. What this endeavour is advising you to do is to reflect upon sorcerous consciousness and understand that the presence and absence of Being optimises the relational quality between physical and metaphysical dimensions. It is, after all a simple request to not accept what you are being told, for there is magic to be found in understanding the process informing your decisions. And so it is that we choose to apply perceptual apprehension to comprehend multiple adumbrations that have already taken place, and with it the darkness of unknowing encroaches upon the Self and makes from it our demeanour. (Hamilton-Giles 2022b, 65–66)

In this crucial statement, Hamilton-Giles proposes a particular understanding of how “magic” could be perceived. When he states that “there is magic to be found in understanding the process informing your decisions”, he introduces an aspect that has often been overlooked in debates about the conceptualisation of “magic”. As has been already noticed by Randall Styers, the conceptualisation of magic has been in line with making magic. Theorists of magic, aiming to dispel beliefs in the power of words, have often employed a similar strategy by creating new meanings to advance magical discourse (Styers 2004, 223).

It is important to note that my chapter does not attempt to define “magic” itself, but rather focuses on discerning an aspect of “magical” inquiry. In this sense, it aligns more closely with the intentions of Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, who seek to identify and analyse patterns of magic, rather than defining “magic” itself (Otto and Stausberg 2014, 11), or with Richard Kieckhefer’s goal of describing the constitutive elements of broader terms such as “magic” (Kieckhefer 2019, 15–16). The exploration of how narratives and images influence practitioners’ choices, and what implications arise from acknowledging this process, becomes a subject for the theorisation of meta-reflection inherent in occult practice.

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to analyse Hamilton-Giles’ occult philosophy, which elaborates on occult practice not only as a case concerned with reflection but also with meta-reflection. While the former is oriented towards interaction with specific representations, the latter is directed towards understanding the general structure of representation. By employing the directions outlined in Hamilton-Giles’ works, similar conditions present in other cases of esoteric practice can be identified and

detailed. This approach helps to elucidate how theoretical considerations are not simply dismissed from practical engagements but are integral to a certain conceptualisation of “magic”.

Notes

- 1 A closely related exploration of this question can be found in Hervé Corvellec's edited volume, *What Is Theory? Answers from the Social and Cultural Sciences* (2013), where in the introduction, he highlights a comparable trajectory regarding the potential treatment of theory as a practical endeavor (Corvellec 2013, 22).
- 2 A note must be made that while considering the significant implications that could ensue from selecting a specific term to denote the practice, I will not distinguish between such descriptors as esoteric, occult, magical, or witchcraft, and will instead employ them interchangeably throughout my examination of Hamilton-Giles.
- 3 Djurdjevic, G: *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (2014); Doyle White, E.: “Robert Cochrane and the Gardnerian Craft: Feuds, Secrets, and Mysteries in Contemporary British Witchcraft.” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 13:2 (2011): pp. 205–224; Doyle White, E.: “An Elusive Roebuck: Luciferianism and Paganism in Robert Cochrane's Witchcraft”, *Correspondences: An Online Journal for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism* 1:1 (2013): pp. 75–101; Doyle White, E.: “Navigating the Crooked Path: Andrew Chumbley and the Sabbatic Craft” in *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West*, edited by Feraro, S. and Doyle White, E., pp. 197–222; Doyle White, E. “The Creation of ‘Traditional Witchcraft’, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 18:2 (2018): pp. 188–216; Elwing, J.: “Where the Three Roads Meet: Sabbatic Witchcraft and Oneiric Praxis in the Writings of Andrew Chumbley” in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, edited by Howard, M. and Schulke, D.A., pp. 249–271; Gregorius, F.: “Luciferian Witchcraft: At the Crossroads between Paganism and Satanism” in *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*, edited by Faxneld, P. and Petersen, J.A., pp. 229–249; Hutton, R. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*.
- 4 Theoretical works: Hamilton-Giles, P. *The Afflicted Mirror: A Study of Ordeals and the Making of Compacts*, Hamilton-Giles, P.: *The Witching-Other: Explorations & Meditations on the Existential Witch*; Hamilton-Giles, P.: *Standing at the Crossroads: Dialectics of the Witching-Other*; Hamilton-Giles, P.: *Ritual Space & the Crooked Path Beyond. Volume I*; Hamilton-Giles, P.: *Ritual Space & the Crooked Path Beyond: Absence, Causality and Deviations. Volume II*; Edwards, I.C., Hamilton-Giles, P.: *Torn Letters of Otherness: Concerning Absence & Alogos*.
Practical works: Hamilton-Giles, P.: *Book of the Black Dragon. Et Nigrum Draconicum: Being the Theory of the Black Dragon. Volume I*; Hamilton-Giles, P. *Codex Althaeban Malik: Book of Aberrations*; Hamilton-Giles,

P. *Book of the Black Dragon. Volume II: The Headless One. Part I*; Hamilton-Giles, P. *The Baron Citadel: Book of the Four Ways*; Hamilton-Giles, P. *Codex Ad Limina: Hallowing the Broken Ground*.

- 5 On the contrary, it could be argued that opposing claims are not uncommon among occult practitioners. Rather than conceding entities to a realm inaccessible to science, some practitioners contend that these phenomena are entirely natural but are often overlooked or misunderstood by scientists (see Egil Asprem's *The Problem of Disenchantment*). However, it is essential to note that this particular strategy is not the focus of the present study.
- 6 The notion of I-reflective could be linked to the phenomenological understanding of self-consciousness, which emphasises the unity between prereflective and reflective domains.
- 7 Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875) was a French esotericist and a prominent figure in the 19th-century occult revival. He wrote extensively on subjects such as magic, Kabbalah, occultism, and alchemy. Lévi is best known for his *work Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, which was published in two volumes between 1854 and 1856.
- 8 In recent studies of early modern media, researchers have traced the influence of pamphlets and broadsheets depicting cases of witchcraft to the broader social reality (Warfield, A.: "Witchcraft and the Early Modern Media." In *The Routledge History of Witchcraft*, edited by Dillinger, J., pp. 208–218). In Wolfgang Behringer's study, it was noted that non-periodical pamphlets and broadsides often promoted the reality of witchcraft, whereas monthly magazines aimed to deconstruct this narrative (Behringer, W. "Hexenverfolgungen im Spiegel zeitgenössischer Publizistik. Die 'Erwytterte Unholden Zeyttung' von 1590." In *Oberbayerisches Archiv* 109: 346–354. 1984. 233).

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5 The Intensification of Myth

Esotericism and Literature in Furio Jesi

Emanuele Curcio

Introduction

Furio Jesi is undoubtedly one of the most erudite, peculiar, and unusual intellectual figures in the Italian cultural scene of the 20th century. As a child, Jesi showed great precocity in learning and dropped out of high school to dedicate himself as a self-taught scholar. Particularly, he was interested in the study of myth in the ancient world and in Egyptian religion.

In his first published articles, Jesi seems to be close to Jung's perspective on the analysis and study of myth. However, while Jung focuses on understanding myth through the psychic archetypes of the collective unconscious, Jesi asserts the necessity of examining the archetypal connections that arise within historical-religious phenomena (Jesi 1958). Upon reading Jung and Kerényi's *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, whose aim was to establish a systematic and scientific approach to the study of mythology, Jesi gradually distanced himself from Jung's stance, describing archetypal connections as "a sort of emotional indecency" (Jesi 2013, 229). In fact, he began to lean towards Kerényi's approach, albeit not definitively, emphasising the study of myth in the modern and contemporary contexts instead of the ancient world.

From 1964 to 1968, Jesi engages in an epistolary exchange with Kerényi (Jesi and Kerényi, 1999). Jesi's initial hermeneutic trajectory is deeply influenced by Kerényi's perspective, particularly by his distinction between genuine myths and technicalised myths. Kerényi believes that myth is an autonomous and independent phenomenon; it is the original form and expression through which human spirit represents, imagines, and shapes itself, as well as the world and the environment in which it lives (Jung and Kerényi 1969, 1–24). However, as Jesi points out, Kerényi sees "‘myth as the myth of man’, with the genitive to be

understood as *genitivus subjectivus* and *objectivus*" (Jesi 1979b, 6). This means that myth presents itself as both a spiritual, autonomous, and genuine expression rooted in man (*subjectivus*) and as a condition that influences and shapes man (*objectivus*). Building upon this distinction, Jesi adopts Kerényi's framework distinguishing between genuine myth and technicalised myth.

The genuine myth represents a favourable and benevolent force for man; it spreads from the depths of human interiority: "Genuine myth is that which arises spontaneously from the depths of the psyche" (Jesi 2002, 35). Additionally, it is directly linked to a state of awake consciousness rather than to a dream-like plane. Genuine myth implies a state of wakefulness, wherein consciousness remains vigilant and resists being overtaken by unconscious influences. A myth is truly genuine when man is able to apply a filter and a distance, essential for its expression and communication through language.

Unlike genuine myth, technicalised myth manipulates memory and transforms the present into monument, ideal, emblem, or herald. Technicalised myth utilises the past and memory not only to legitimise and give voice to a past deemed as glorious and legendary, but also to mobilise those who live in the present. It involves manipulating sedimented mythological materials, reworking them to produce a desired effect in the present. As Jesi describes, it is "intentionally evoked by man in order to achieve certain purposes" (Jesi 2002, 36). Thus, the technicalisation of myth coincides with the political use of myth. This political use of myth is often reserved for a selected group or a small circle, leaving those outside marginalised and affected by its effects. Technicalised myth lacks the creative spontaneity of genuine myth and instead perpetuates the past without regard for language or words, often taking on a funereal and ominous quality.

In his text *Mito (Myth 1973)*, Jesi explains that it is not possible to access the essence of myth or to conceive it as a fundamental substance of nature. To reach such "reality" is an elusive endeavour. Even the essence of the Greek *mýthos* (μῦθος) remains beyond complete comprehension. There is no possibility to "drink" from the source of myth and to catch its essence, "an essence *already and no longer accessible*" (Jesi 1973, 40). Given the ontological limitations of discussing the essence of myth, Jesi advocates for studying its historical effects and the techniques employed by gnoseological, scientific, and political systems to tap into the mythical experience. For us moderns, the authentic and profound meaning of *mýthos* and the experience produced by it has become obscured and it cannot be retrieved in its intimacy and intrinsic deepness. Instead, there is a tendency to view myth as a fabricated or arbitrary narrative,

or even as a false tale believed to be true, as seen in Enlightenment approaches like that of Charles-François Dupuis. According to Dupuis, myth is construed as a product of misunderstanding astronomical events, relegated to a status lower than reason, and associated with emotion (Jesi 1973, 44–47).

Jesi argues that “within the framework of the ‘history of myth’, the only viable science is the history of historiography” (Jesi 1973, 40). Mythologists,¹ through their theories, never truly grasp the essence of myth. Rather, they revolve and turn around it, without ever achieving a definitive understanding of the mythical phenomenon or fact in itself. Jesi characterises the science of myth as the “science of going around in circles” (Jesi 1973, 105) and as the “hollow form within which every gnoseological practice is contained” (Jesi 1973, 35–36). The gnoseological purpose of the science of myth is to re-actualise, rejuvenate, and modernise myth, making it “eatable”, that is, usable for those who seek to access it. To do this, mythologists endeavour to approach myth either through explanation or acceptance: it becomes a matter of “explaining or accepting” it (Jesi 1973, 57).

When contemplating the acceptance of myth, Jesi draws upon the insights of Creuzer and particularly Bachofen (Jesi 1973, 47–52). According to Creuzer and Bachofen, Jesi observes, myth serves a symbolic purpose. Creuzer defines symbol an experiential, direct, and immediate intuition that allows an artistic and moral access to the divine (Jesi 1973, 50–53). In Jesi’s view, Bachofen conceptualises the symbol as an “objective reality that ‘rests in itself’, signifying nothing beyond its intrinsic essence” (Jesi 1973, 50). In essence, the symbol refers solely to itself, finding in itself its origin, fulfilment, and meaning, as well as its own juridical and political legitimacy. However, upon the awakening of the symbol from its state of silence, it triggers a mechanism of death, serving as a sign of the interweaving of death with life: “Not to death ‘in itself’, to the death that concerns the natural sciences, but rather to mythical death: to the myth of death” (Jesi 2002, 17). In attempting to conceive myth in its symbolic elevation, there lies the danger of inviting fatalism, of succumbing to a destiny that seeks to subjugate life itself and ensnare existence, thereby introducing the potential for individual and collective demise. Put differently, when the symbol is awakened from its slumbering silence, it inherently triggers a function associated with death.

In light of what has been discussed, how does esotericism relate to myth? According to Jesi, “Since all esotericism follows the path of myth, and relies on a revelation of the divine through an ‘intensification’ of the relationship with myth, rather than through a ‘demythisation’” (Jesi 2002, 51), it can be broadly inferred that esotericism – even when it interacts with

mythological science (Jesi 1990, 165–193) – seeks to accentuate, enhance, and deepen its connection with the absent essence of myth, embracing an acceptance and absorption of myth.

In this chapter, esotericism will be examined from Jesi’s perspective, starting with the concept of “intensification”. Within this framework, literature turns out to be an effective tool for understanding this process. Along this path, numerous writers, poets, and artists have consciously engaged with esotericism, altering their relationship with myth to varying degrees of potency or intensity, each guided by distinct objectives, intentions, and methods.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The second part focuses on the perspectives of Cesare Pavese and Novalis insofar as they are situated in an intensified relationship with myth. Opposed to this intensification is Hoffmann’s perspective, which seeks to propose an artistic exorcism of the influence of myth through a tendency towards demythisation. However, for Jesi, the influence of myth extends beyond writers, artists, or poets, and permeates collective beliefs and political ideologies within groups. The third part delves into right-wing cultures, which are characterised by traditionalist political and cultural views. These perspectives, by intensifying their connection with myth, often propagate ideals centred on death and ritual violence. Given the significant role of myth in shaping political and collective consciousness, the fourth section explores how literature serves as a vital indicator of the pervasive sickness that swept through Nazi Germany. This section discusses the works of Kubin, who deepens his engagement with myth, and Thomas Mann, who resists the allure of mystification and the violent tendencies of political mythologies. In the fifth part, Jesi’s perspective on Rilke’s humanistic esotericism is briefly examined in order to understand the extent to which genuine myth can be discerned. Jesi’s scepticism extends even to Rilke’s suggestions regarding humanistic esotericism. Finally, the conclusions draw attention to Jesi’s theoretical framework, which consistently encourages critical and deconstructive analyses. Rather than focusing solely on myth itself, Jesi’s approach emphasises the examination of its manipulation in both social and political spheres, as well as on individual and biographical levels. Given the inherent difficulty in understanding *a priori* the essence of myth and the ontological challenge of capturing its core, Jesi suggests that a more productive approach is to focus on its biographical function and the historical processes involved in every myth-making endeavour. The aim is to elucidate the various strategies of dissimulation, machination, and technicalisation employed by narrators, poets, and artists.

Pavese's and Novalis's Intensifications Against Hoffmann's Depotentiation

In Jesi's examination of myth in modern and contemporary contexts, literature takes centre stage. This section revisits some of the literary figures analysed by Jesi, as outlined in his text *Letteratura e mito* (*Literature and myth* 1967), revealing a dialectic between intensification and depotentiation of myth.

How does literature relate to myth? Literature does not merely involve the continuation, preservation, or concealment of symbolic plots and archetypal constructs from the grand cosmological narratives and symbols within the modern age, as proposed by Eliade (1963, 190–191; Eliade 1978, 189–196). Jesi writes:

Poetry and mythology, or the very essence they embody, endure in modern culture due to their preservation, defence, and sustenance by an enigmatic “something and nothingness”. This enigma defines them and serves as the immediate boundary of behaviour with death. Their survival in the present, and perhaps in others before it, finds support in a nurturing environment that withstands the harshness of contemporary times. This resilience is owed to the multifaceted and impactful qualities of death, which offer sustenance and vitality despite the desolation of the present.

(Jesi 2002, 29)

If esotericism proceeds from an intensification of myth, it is imperative not so much to grasp the essence of myth itself, but to comprehend the inner workings of those who live mythically. Understanding the fundamental mechanisms that individuals, especially writers, have with the original source from which they draw is crucial. By deepening this relationship with the absent core of myth, poets or writers venture into dangerous realms and obscure paths; in doing so, they expose themselves to the perils associated with mythical and ritual death. This is most evident in 20th-century *avant-garde* literature, which, while declaring a departure from tradition and memory towards an uncertain future, “tends to restore orthodoxy to a relationship with death older than that represented by tradition” (Jesi 2002, 58).

However, this argument finds support in the works of writers such as Cesare Pavese and Novalis. The intersection of literature with mortality is starkly apparent in Cesare Pavese, a writer and poet who tragically took his own life in 1950. Pavese regarded myth as an inherent and timeless archetype woven into the fabric of human existence. Through its symbolic

reinterpretation, myth bestows significance, rhythm, and vibrancy upon life and its myriad experiences (Pavese 1990, 255–311). However, in Pavese’s work, particularly in his later years, the sense of impossibility in accessing a primal and primordial experience of myth becomes more pronounced. Confronted with the impossibility of tapping into the essence of myth, he nonetheless attempts to delve deeper, aligning his innermost secrets with his personal interpretation of living myth; this pursuit coincides with the distinctive dimension of self-sabotage and self-destruction. By intertwining myth with his life’s journey, Pavese merges his existential yearning for death with his eventual demise. Jesi concludes: “Hence, I have frequently described a reverence for death within Pavese’s literary works and in Pavese himself” (Jesi 2002, 126).

In this context, Pavese’s affinity with the myth of death is further underscored by his esoteric language. Similar to Stefan George’s poetry, Jesi suggests that Pavese employs an “esoteric” language alongside his poetic expression. A notable example is the phrase “feasts flowers sacrifices on the edge of mystery” (Pavese 1946, 209), which Jesi highlights as particularly significant as it echoes the style of Eduard Schuré (Jesi 2002, 132). This expression serves to evoke a human trembling, an individual throbbing experienced when standing on the brink and boundary of the enigmatic process of initiation. This expression teeters on the edge of Dionysian triumphs, dwelling in a nocturnal, shadowy, and sylvan dimension that conjures the thrill of vertigo and a dangerous exploration of the abyss, symbolising death and loss of the self, akin to the conclusion of the myth of Orpheus. In this context, truth comes at a considerable cost. The sacrifice of the individual is the toll extracted by the poetic power of the word in accordance with an Orphic conception of language; it seeks death as a means to attain the essence of things. This esoteric language, by enhancing its relationship with ecstatic experiences, points Pavese towards a final step into a realm steeped in mortality.

Another author enveloped within the narrative of a lethal myth, according to Jesi’s analysis, is Novalis. It is widely acknowledged that Novalis was motivated by a pedagogical and humanistic purpose. His intent, fuelled by profound ardour and courage, stands in contrast to many other Romantics who were often entangled in infatuation and obsessed with suicidal despair, as exemplified in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. However, not even Novalis turns out to be immune to certain deadly and sacrificial epiphanies. An example of this is found in his *Hymns of the Night*. In this text, despite his steadfast commitment to religious faith and his profound love for Sophie, the poet discerns the presence of a darkness preceding the vision of eternity. He concludes his journey in the *Sixth Hymn* with a “yearning for death” (*Sehnsucht nach dem Tode*). Embracing death becomes essential for the poet to unveil the grandeur of

his vision and to impart a new spirituality to humanity upon his return from seclusion.

The profound desire to uplift his own will, fuelled by a spirit of adventure, fervour, and courage in the pursuit of a rejuvenated humanism vision, propels Novalis, according to Jesi, to venture into obscure paths and forge connections with “shadowy realms” (Jesi 2002, 65). By immersing himself in the nebulous darkness of night and embracing this primal and epiphanic vision, Novalis enters into a pact of longing and yearning with death, reminiscent of Faust’s pact with Goethe’s Mephistopheles. Indeed, Jesi observes that Novalis, in his quest for the perfect work of art, grapples with an existential pact akin to Faust’s. Goethe, as Jesi reports, maintains that it was advantageous for certain secrets to remain concealed and that “not everything should be told to everyone” (Jesi 2002, 66), suggesting an esoteric depth that may not be suitable for exploration. However, Novalis is determined to uncover the secret of crafting the perfect work of art, akin to the Great Work (Magnus Opus) of alchemy,² which would effectively convey his humanistic ideals.

Novalis’ intention in Henry of Ofterdingen is to achieve the zenith of artistic creation by tapping into realms beyond the poet’s ordinary domain. Within the narrative, he introduces the enigmatic and obscure figure of the alchemist Klingsohr (Novalis 2015, 126), who serves as Henry’s guide in true art and authentic knowledge. Klingsohr emphasises that the poet must not only rely on pure and simple emotion, but also possess the ability to integrate a philosophical-mystical understanding of nature during the act of creation. However, Klingsohr’s guidance leads Henry through an initiatory journey where he tests his will in pursuit of the perfect masterpiece, in harmony with a natural philosophy. This journey ends tragically with Mathilde’s death and an artistic deadlock, symbolising the inability to complete the work. Although Novalis did not directly confront death as Pavese did, his inclination to affirm his poetic will towards the creation of the great alchemical and artistic work remains confined, ultimately resulting in failure.

In light of the discussions surrounding Novalis and Pavese, the mechanisms of intensification and identification with the myth lead to a progressive acceptance of death (Pavese) or artistic defeat (Novalis). Yet, Jesi also observes counteractive mechanisms and strategies, exemplified by E.T.A. Hoffmann. In response to this mythical encounter, Hoffmann employs parody – akin to the approaches of Ezra Pound and Apuleius (Jesi 2002, 189–241) – and notably, social criticism.

As for Novalis, Jesi suggests the existence of a similar esoteric horizon within Hoffman’s literary art. Just as Novalis grapples with the Faustian pact and delves into alchemy, so too does Hoffmann. This connection is highlighted through Jesi’s examination of Hoffmann’s novel *Klein Zaches*

genannt Zinnober (Hoffmann 2015). Even the title of the novel suggests a link between literature and alchemy, as “Zaches” is also referred to as cinabar, symbolising the culmination of the alchemical process. However, the correlation does not end there. Hoffmann strategically situates the alchemical laboratory of the magician Prosper Alpanus at the narrative’s core, serving not only as the focal point of alchemical experimentation (*atànor*), but also playing a significant literary role. This laboratory functions as the dialectical counterpoint within the narrative, triggering a transformation in the protagonist’s fate and fundamentally reshaping the trajectory of the story: “There, at the magical centre, one discovers not only the esoteric secret of events, but also the pivotal point and primary mechanism of the narrative operation” (Jesi, 2020, 222).

However, Jesi argues that Hoffmann cannot be considered an esotericist or a provider of secrets. The inclusion of certain references to alchemy does not serve to convey a certain kind of initiatory knowledge or to embed secret messages intended for a limited readership. Instead, he uses these elements to depict moral ambiguity and uncertainty. Unlike other Romantics, such as Novalis, who delve into the depths of darkness and nothingness, Hoffmann maintains a more detached and ironic stance when confronted with the Faustian pact. While acknowledging the deeply intriguing and manipulative aspect of engaging directly with such obscure realms, Hoffmann employs irony to critique society.

Although Jesi emphasises the symbolic and alchemical deployment that underlies both the characters and the structure of the narration, the story harbours “undoubted shades of political satire” (Jesi, 2020, 229), with an implicit folkloric and anti-bourgeois message. Hoffmann emphasises distressing and suffering aspects to illustrate the political and social significance of the outcasts and the marginalised, who are singled out as guilty. Zaches, so long as he manages to hide his secret, exerts attraction and fascination, but evokes fear and contempt when he reveals his true nature. Zaches’ genuine appearance remains concealed; he is deemed deplorable, abnormal, horrible, and monstrous not only because he veils his true identity, but also because, in the eyes of the artists and the bourgeoisie, his origin is that of a poor, miserable, and, therefore, guilty peasant. Thus, Zaches embodies not the aristocratic and bourgeois spirit, but rather the folkloric spirit of the excluded and marginalised. Jesi emphasises that Zaches evokes in the reader a sense of pity and compassion lacking in bourgeois class society.

Although Hoffmann hailed from a bourgeois family, his art could be defined as a form of social critique through humour, satire, and parody to spotlight the bourgeois tendency to perceive physical differences as menacing. Despite emerging during the Romantic era, Hoffmann’s work maintains a connection to Enlightenment ideals (Jesi 2020, 263). Rather

than portraying individuals with physical anomalies as mystical or sinister, he endeavours to debunk such misconceptions and advocate for their societal inclusion. This ethos extends to his tales, which reside outside the realm of adult hypocrisy, embracing the innocence and authenticity of childhood (Jesi 2002, 75–76).

In brief, based on the discussion thus far, the writer, when narrating a story, does not merely evoke longing for a vanished paradisiacal and fantastical world. Rather, by incorporating certain esoteric elements and portraying imaginary characters,³ the writer establishes relational mechanisms with myth. A notable trend emerges among the examined authors. Pavese and Novalis both deepen their engagement with myth: Pavese, through the utilisation of esoteric language, and Novalis, through his exploration of alchemy. While Pavese embraces individual death as a consequence of this immersion, Novalis experiences artistic undoing. In contrast, Hoffmann, despite his foray into alchemy, employs irony as a means to deflect and critique the unsettling aspects of these realms, thus shaping his resistance.

The “Ideas Without Words” in Traditionalism and Right-Wing Culture

Jesi addresses myth both as a personal experience and a collective and political phenomenon (Raimondi 2023).⁴ This section delves into the intricate issue of how myth is manipulated and politicised on a collective scale, drawing insights from Jesi’s work *Cultura di destra* (*Right-wing culture* 1979). Additionally, it explores how right-wing culture employs “ideas without words” to deepen its engagement with myth, aiming to revive tradition and express collective impulses towards themes of death and ritual violence.

According to Jesi, right-wing culture is a traditionalist culture that manipulates and reshuffles the past and memory to assert its authority. In doing this it advocates for a political project of universal transformation and regeneration. Through the manipulation of mythological material from the past, it endeavours to restore ancient values and foster a sense of shared identity and collective purpose. Employing symbolic and evocative language, often referred to as “ideas without words”, both right-wing and left-wing cultures⁵ aim to convey their ideologies and garner support (Jesi 1979a, 7).

The concept “ideas without words” (coined by Spengler) refers to notions that transcend conventional linguistic discourse. Instead of offering logical arguments or historical explanations, they manifest as concise slogans and watchwords aimed at eliciting powerful emotions, often associated with themes of mortality. Take, for instance, the Spanish

phrase “Viva La Muerte” (“Long live death”), which, with its militaristic connotations, embodies sentiments of vengeance, rebellion, and defiance. This slogan romanticises the idea of death, portraying it as something noble and captivating (Jesi 1979a, 33). Similarly, slogans such as the Italian fascist motto “Me ne frego” (“I don’t give a damn”) or the Italian neo-fascist expression “Boia chi molla” (“Who gives up is a rogue”) convey a similar sentiment. Despite their broad appeal, these slogans serve as a “symbolic armamentarium” (Jesi 1979a, 31), promoting the idea that confronting death, whether one’s own or another’s, is not an act of cowardice but rather one of bravery and honour. Ultimately, “ideas without words” constitute a symbolic language imbued with themes of mortality and fate.

However, the symbolic language of “ideas without words” extends beyond its esoteric and public value: “A language of ideas is above all an esoteric language, and esotericism is not confined to Eleusinian mysteries or – on the contrary – gatherings of the Theosophical Society” (Jesi 1979a, 8). From this perspective, esoteric language entails the construction of an additional, deeper, concealed, and hence symbolic layer of meaning, communicated through hermetic and confidential channels empowering the initiates who safeguard it. Such communication imparts private emotions and individual experiences to initiates, rather than thoughts and concepts conveyed in a universally understandable language. Esoteric language, therefore, is one that alludes to, refers to, and recalls an implicit secret. Thus, right-wing culture relies on an esoteric language accessible only to a restricted group, the profound content of which must remain concealed.

Jesi observes that what endures throughout history and in Western esotericism appears to be the preservation of secrecy, which persists into the modern and contemporary world. This secrecy leads to “the painful mark of individual isolation and the exclusion of collective truth” (Jesi 2002, 52). Many modern and contemporary esotericists maintain the conviction that accessing the secret entails forced and deliberate isolation, as well as voluntary estrangement from the profane social reality. The consequences of such alienation can manifest in individuals, small groups, entire populations, or even nations. In reaction to their isolation, these entities expand and undergo a collective transformation of questionable morality.

An example of this concept is provided by the perspective of Elias Canetti, a scholar frequently associated with right-wing ideologies. Canetti posits that secrecy and power are inherently intertwined: “Secrecy lies at the very core of power” (Canetti, 1981, 290). Secrecy, shared by both the sorcerer and the paranoid, rests on a principle of preservation, resisting to any form of metamorphosis, transformation or progression. Canetti argues that every secret harbours a treasure, something immune to

degradation or decay that must be shielded from potential plunder. Those who possess the secret are compelled and forced to existentially encounter a reservoir of inscrutability, impenetrability, and indecipherability. This is deemed essential for those who withdraw into the shadows – similar to Ernst Jünger’s vision of traversing the forest in *The Forest Passage* – to silently amass power and plan their strategies: “Silence not only guards it, but gives it greater concentration” (Canetti 1981, 294). The power unleashed by secrecy appears to be the culmination of the secluded and solitary individuals who meticulously plot and foresee actions in silence, much like players in a game of chess, “the game of power and survival of the fittest” (Jesi 1979b, 312). Jesi suggests that Canetti’s exaltation of silence as both instrument and weapon underscores the idea that “behind every mass phenomenon, a function of death emerges” (Jesi 1979b, 322). Canetti, echoing certain esotericists and traditionalists, reiterates a deadly element that validates a language of “ideas without words”.

The notion of “ideas without words” has often been embraced by esotericists, intellectuals, and scholars with a right-wing background. While acknowledging the secrecy of their knowledge and the limitations of verbal expression, they paradoxically tend to rely excessively on words, especially in their writings. When Jesi explores esotericism intertwined with right-wing culture, his focus lies predominantly on “Traditionalist” esotericism – “excluding any unknown Superiors beyond our sight!” (Jesi 1979a, 6). Figures such as René Guenon, Mircea Eliade, and above all Julius Evola are closely associated with this pattern.

Traditionalism views the modern age as an era marked by decadence, decline, and spiritual degradation, a trend believed to have been perpetuated by Enlightenment, rationalist, and materialist philosophies up to the present moment. Traditionalist authors conceptualise past, present, and future as cosmic cycles of destruction and rebirth. This process can be traced both in the cycles delineated by Hesiod and those articulated in the Kali Yuga (Evola 1969, 221–228). However, traditionalism remains firmly anchored in the past, as it continuously relies and draws upon mythological material associated with various traditions. All this emphasises intensification with myth rather than demythisation.

Evola, a metaphysical neo-idealist aligned with the actualist perspective of the Italian neo-Hegelian Giovanni Gentile, fully embodies this approach. Evola’s perspective, profoundly intertwined with a right-wing culture marked by overtly fascist and racist ideologies, underscores the ontological diversity of human beings and societies (Evola 2000, 39–46). Evola introduces the concept of spiritual races, which encompass both spiritual and physical attributes (Evola 1994; Jesi 1979a, 83–84). These races are tasked with defining their identities and fulfilling their destinies, even at the expense of their own survival or that of others. According to this

view, “the men of a group *are born* bearers of a specific culture and subject to a predetermined fate” (Jesi 1979a, 17). To fulfil their destinies, peoples and human communities often seek to rediscover a mythical and ancient past. However, Evola’s traditionalist and morally deplorable stance, aimed at resurrecting a presumed origin in the present, tends to oversimplify the intricacies of historical developments and the fluid nature of human societies. This approach has a tendency to generalise historical and cultural phenomena, often idealising them and imbuing them with metaphysical significance. When peoples are assessed solely through the lens of the destiny imposed upon them, neglecting the potential for historical and contingent transformations, it fosters political ideologies projecting deadly, homicidal, and criminal intentions onto both themselves and others. This trend was prevalent in the political ideologies of the 20th-century Europe, which shamelessly exploited various mythological narratives to justify massacres and atrocities. Literature, too, has reflected these tendencies, portraying initiates burdened with futile tasks and glorifying senseless violence, as seen in the works of Gabriele D’Annunzio (Jesi 1979a, 141–150) and Luigi Pirandello (Jesi 1979a, 148–152). In essence, when the intensification of myth invests the collective level, beyond to individual experiences, Jesi argues that it signifies a form of technicalisation typical of right-wing cultures, which propagate intentions of death through brutality and violence.

Although contemporary esotericism, especially in its more spiritualistic and pantheistic offshoots, may interpret the death of initiates as a virtual and imaginative process essential for rebirth or individuation, there persists the risk that symbolic death could turn into individual or collective death through ritual sacrifice. Mythical death, rather than remaining confined to the realm of symbolism or virtuality, frequently translates into actual instances of ritualistic killing. This grim aspiration has been a consistent feature across various right-wing cultural movements.

Sickness and Aversion: Literature in 20th-Century German Culture

This section explores certain aspects concerning the revival of myth in 20th-century German culture, drawing from Jesi’s text *Germania segreta. Miti nella cultura tedesca del ’900* (*Secret Germany. Myth in Twentieth-Century German Culture* 1967). In this context, literature also serves as an effective informant and a valuable indicator of an intensification rooted in ancestral past that manifests as a collective illness, as exemplified in Kubin. At the same time, literature can also be seen as a response to this shared illness, characterised by a sense of distance, resistance, and aversion, as evidenced in Thomas Mann’s work.

Europe's major right-wing political cultures of the 20th century attempted to exploit and draw on a certain mixed, confused, and tangled past to elaborate their own political and ideological agendas, often contributing to a climate of death. This phenomenon was observable not only in the autocratic regimes of Francoist Spain, Salazar's Portugal, and the Greek colonels, but also in movements such as the Romanian legionary movement, which included Eliade among its members. The Romanian legionaries sought to attain heroism through acts of violence and martyrdom, epitomised by their motto: "Not to *win or die*, but to *win by dying*" (Jesi 1979a, 41).

Among all these movements, Nazism stands out for its integration of a "religion of death" into its ideology, incorporating mythical and ritualistic elements. Unlike fascism and the openly public and exoteric culture of the Italian right-wing culture,⁶ Jesi concedes that discussing esoteric Nazism navigates particularly murky waters, making it challenging to shed clear philological light on the issue. According to Jesi, the concept of "Reich without a centre" (Jesi 1979a, 60) accurately depicts a situation characterised by both esoteric-ritual and esoteric-mythical elements.

The accusation against the Jew – a phenomenon associated with an anti-Semitic mythological machine that has operated covertly throughout Western history (Jesi 2007) – carried this esoteric-ritual dimension. The notion of eradicating and annihilating Jewish individuals exemplifies the deadly essence of a ritualistic aspect that has engulfed this core. In Nazism, the Jew is not only viewed exoterically as a corrupting force on the authentic Germanic spirit, purportedly responsible for Germany's economic downturn between the two World Wars. The Jew is also depicted as a figure associated with mystical and arcane forces. As witnessed in certain anti-Semitic contexts of 19th-century Germany, the Jew is portrayed as a "*potent threat*" (Jesi 1979a, 52, emphasis in the original), a "privileged being endowed with intrinsic and mysterious qualities, *thus* marked for elimination" (Jesi 1979a, 52).

The quest for the centre inherent in esoteric Nazism extends beyond the revival of archaic pangermanism, embodied by figures such as Parsifal, Siegfried, the Nibelungen, and historical individuals from the first Reich. According to Jesi, this pursuit of a mythical and political centre in Nazism must also encompass the East and particularly the legendary Thule Island. To elucidate this connection, Jesi not only delineates the historical events and corroborating evidence regarding esoteric Nazism (Jesi 1995, 217–219), but also explores its implicit "phenomenology" (Jesi 1995, 216).

To explain the "phenomenology" of a "Reich without a centre" Jesi delves into Alfred Kubin's work *Die andere Seite* (*The other side* 1909). In

this work, the protagonist finds himself ensconced within the city of Perla, an enigmatic realm nestled in the East. This city emerges as a dark and decadent urban landscape, a contrived and counterfeit environment submerged by ancient ruins and rubble. Its theatrical inhabitants are restless beings marked by singular pains and haunted by persistent anguish. Existing within a perpetual dream-like state, they serve as mere puppets under the dominion of the fantastical and enigmatic ruler, “Claus Patera, absoluter Herr des Traumreichs” (Kubin 1909, 5). The narrative culminates in an apocalyptic showdown between Patera and Hercules Bell, wherein Patera obliterates his own world entirely. Through the analysis of this narrative, insights into the political and cultural climate preceding Nazism emerge. The supposed inhabitants of Perla (Germany; Thule) live in a dream-like state (shared illness). Their efforts and varied actions are channelled by a spell (Nazi propaganda) produced by the figure of Patera (Hitler), who is defeated in the final battle (World War II) against Bell (USA), a rational, enlightened figure with an intrepid and pragmatic demeanour.

Jesi contends that Kubin’s immersion in the horrors of this dream reflects Germany’s isolation before and during World War II, as well as its attempt to position itself in stark opposition to the West and the rest of the world. By delving deeper into myth and incorporating its deadly essence into his own psyche and work, Kubin not only serves as a significant marker of a technicalised myth, but also embodies a profound illness.

Despite being lauded as authentic and genuine creators, the artists or the poets become the vessel for a collective sentiment, a shared *pathos* that carries a political and social implications. The artists succumb to illness when he dwells in an unconscious and perpetual dream-like state, detached from historical consciousness. According to Jesi, Klages and Nietzsche are also noteworthy examples of this embodiment. When lethal symbols, depicted through horrifying imagery, permeate their psyche, it becomes evident that the artist is afflicted: “Here lie the inherent dangers of the artist’s condition: sterility and guilt, horror and death” (Jesi 1995 66–67). Indeed, the failure to consciously recognise the “rise in mythical temperature” can exacerbate the writer’s psychological distress.

In the milieu of Nazism, authors like Bertolt Brecht and, notably, Thomas Mann recognised the pervasiveness of myth in their contemporary context. However, they staunchly opposed the ideological and mesmerising consequences that an irrational revelation would impose upon them. Confronted with the potential escalation of myth from a collective standpoint, Thomas Mann chose to abstain. He symbolises the literary scholar who adeptly maintains a conscious resistance against such mythical epiphanies (Manera 2022, 141–161).

It could be argued that Mann also incorporates mythological elements, particularly drawing from astrological motifs rooted in the Ancient Near East (Jesi 1979b, 207). In Mann's works, such as *Doctor Faustus*, one can discern numerous subtle allusions or what Jesi labels as "occult quotations" (Jesi 1979b, 205). However, Mann does not attribute inherent ontological or doctrinal significance to mythological and esoteric materials. Rather, he views astrology devoid of esoteric meaning that symbolises a connection between the microcosm and macrocosm. As Jesi contends, "Astrology always implies power dynamics and interplay of forces" (Jesi 1979b, 214). In essence, Mann does not merely reintroduce astrological themes into his narrative works and interpret them symbolically; he portrays hidden, occult power dynamics and sinister operations among the characters and their social hierarchy. Such power relations are, in fact, acknowledged and justified by Adrian:

Astrological ages knew a great deal. They knew or surmised things that truly wide-ranging science is picking up on again now. That illness, plagues, epidemics have something to do with the position of the stars was an intuitive certainty in those days. And today we have come to a point where we debate whether the germs, bacteria, organisms that cause, let us say, an influenza epidemic on earth come from other planets, from Mars, Jupiter, or Venus.

(Mann 1999, 289)

These influences, akin to diseases that course through biological existence, also exert subliminal effects and influence on the psyche of the characters, including Adrian: "Adrian's descent into dementia epitomises the sovereign dominance of the collective unconscious over the individual, and of the unconscious over consciousness" (Jesi 1995, 28).

Unlike many other writers, Mann does not succumb to an old-fashioned approach embodied by Adrian: "Thomas Mann aims to position himself on a different level: he observes his characters and presents their lives without fully identifying with any of them" (Jesi 1995, 76). Mann can be likened to a "thermometer" measuring the cultural and political impact of myth. Mann's entire artistic project maintains a pedagogical stance; his intention is to caution against the technicalising tendencies of myth.

Two distinct tendencies can be discerned in relation to the collective myth: On one hand, Kubin intensifies his engagement with myth, hinting at a morbid and funereal trend reminiscent of Nazism. On the other hand, Mann adopts a stance of resistance and demythisation, portraying this mythical dimension through illness.

Rilke's Humanistic Esotericism

Can we conceive of a genuine myth stripped of its violent and reactionary nature? To address this query, Jesi examines Rilke. This section focuses on select insights from *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Rainer Maria Rilke (Esotericism and mythological language. Studies on Rainer Maria Rilke 1976)*, exploring Jesi's perspective on the potential for literary and poetic esotericism.

According to Jesi, Rilke is not a mystic; he never implies the necessity of negating and suppressing the will in order to achieve presence and adherence to the secret. Rather, Jesi argues that Rilke's poetic esotericism embodies a volitional principle that cannot be entirely eradicated. Rilke is portrayed as an esotericist who consistently upholds a principle of will: "His will is not annihilated; rather, it remains a lucid and deliberative will, albeit one – a volitional dross – transformed into a 'blind and pure instrument' – the will of one who partakes in the secret" (Jesi 2020, 54). In this context, the will – described as "volitional dross" – does not represent the elevation or affirmation of the ego; it is not merely a declaration of desire or assertion of power. Instead, the will functions as a mechanism through which the poet engages in the rituals of initiatory creation. By delving into the hidden centre, the will guides and directs an experience that, while solitary and secluded, always reflects a profoundly human aspect. Asserting the presence of poetic esotericism does not imply direct access to pure knowledge through the elevation of one's will alone. According to Rilke's perspective, there can be no direct access to a divine experience without recourse to the poetic word and language, which serve as spiritual witnesses.

At the same time, Rilke's esotericism diverges from occultism. Occultism, as it emerged in late 19th-century English culture, drew from the "hothouse esotericism" of Frazer's *Golden Bough* (Jesi 1979b, 158–173), relying on various techniques to commune with a perceived "supernatural" mystery. While Rilke's work does display connections to parapsychology (Jesi 2020, 132), it would be inaccurate to label him as an occultist. According to Jesi, Rilke viewed occultism as a fragmented pursuit, yielding isolated epiphanies under specific conditions and fostering a "superficial, curious, unprejudiced tendency that confines secrets to singular manifestations" (Jesi 2020, 133). Instead, Rilke's approach embodies a poetic esotericism wherein the entire world is infused with mystery, eschewing privileged revelations and "single, episodic encounters with splinters of mystery" (Jesi 2020, 133). According to Rilke, mystery permeates all aspects of reality and transcends confinement to specific circumstances or intermediaries. Jesi asserts that Rilke maintains a profound awareness of the

universal, indivisible presence of mystery. According to Jesi, this indicates Rilke's "dutiful awareness of the universal and unfragmentable presence of mystery" (Jesi 2020, 133).

Furthermore, when discussing Rilke's esotericism, it is not appropriate to view it in the traditionalist sense, which implies elitist access to secretive dimensions from which the profane are excluded. Access to the sphere of the secret is not restricted by other individuals who are part of an inner circle or an oligarchic power.

How can Rilke's poetic esotericism be defined? Rilke's poetic esotericism is humanistic: "Esotericism is, from this perspective, the norm of being human" (Jesi 2020, 58). In essence, Rilke's esotericism is an expression of an awareness that can be experienced by all individuals. All human beings can access a "time of the secret", but not humanity as a whole; it is not possible to have a collective experience of the secret. Only individuals can experience the secret in solitude. Within this context, esotericism arises when the secret becomes a moral compass, guiding individuals through processes of inner transmutation. Poetic esotericism envisages the preservation of a secret within intimacy, safeguarding and protecting an inaccessible and profound centre. However, Rilke's poetic esotericism is characterised by the allure of a humanistic experience that can only be accessed through solitary engagement with the poet's words. Rilke's poetry is esoteric because it *functions* through the communication of a secret.

In presenting the accessibility of this secret to all individuals, Rilke unveils two interconnected possibilities, which Jesi elucidates through a dialectic of privilege and limitation. Those granted entry into the poet's secret recognise that their privilege bestows upon them a vision imbued with *feeling* and *will* (Jesi 2020, 59). However, this privilege also imposes a constraint: individuals within the poet's inner circle are confronted with an "epiphany of a reality that confines existence to itself and designates it as a domain of self-justifying phenomena" (Jesi 2020, 51). Here, privilege does not merely imply protection; rather, it entails being confined within the secret circle. According to Jesi, those engaged in the secret are uninterested in comprehending the mechanisms of entry or exit from the centre and remain indifferent to rational explanations of the poet's workings.

If Rilke's humanistic esotericism is primarily connected to his poetic will, Jesi argues that it is essential to explore how this will be delineated in his only autobiographical work, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. This text not only serves as the canvas upon which Rilke translates and transposes his alchemical intentions and knowledge, such as the castle of *Urnekloster* (Rilke 2016, §15), but also as the domain where his will

drives him towards a divergence of his “underwater” self: Malte aspires to be a poet, yet he is not a poet; he is an aristocrat, the last and quintessential aristocrat. In contrast, Rilke was not an aristocrat; he was a poet. Rilke strives to mould himself into an aristocrat, thereby denying himself access to the poetic domain. He undertakes all of this through the lens of a tale, not a poem. It is a matter of reconciling these two figures, bridging the chasm between what Rilke actually and tangibly was – a poet – and his failed existential ambition of becoming an aristocrat.

Despite his willingness to entertain the notion of esotericism in Rilke, his perspective remains deeply sceptical. Jesi adopts a critical and deconstructive approach in his examination of Rilke’s work, highlighting a pattern of dissimulation. This suggests that Rilke might possess a talent for concealing or continuously obscuring something from himself. Ultimately, Jesi does not allow himself to be dazzled by Rilke’s quest for an incommunicable secret; indeed, he modestly admits to harbouring no “hope” in such an endeavour (Jesi 2020, 42).

Jesi suggests that a critical inquiry should not be fixated solely on uncovering the centre of the esoteric secret. Instead, it should explore the repercussions of the experience it engenders, elucidating the various games, mechanisms, contexts, methods, and strategies employed by the poet as he delves into his inner self in pursuit of hidden truths, thereby forging a connection between himself and his readers. By remaining outside the confines of the secret, one can engage in unfettered critical and rational thinking. Jesi argues that an authentic and legitimate philosophical stance necessitates a critical approach; philosophers respond through reasoned discourse and precise language. Thus, critics should resist the allure of the secrets evoked by the poet’s words and instead endeavour to engage in open discourse and analysis. This is why Jesi writes: “I prefer to speak rather than remain silent” (Jesi 2020, 49). In contrast to Wittgenstein’s assertion, “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen”, Adorno contends that, in the face of silence, it is imperative to engage critically and historically in dialogue (Adorno 2008, 74). In this sense, words and discourse serve not only as tools for correction and criticism, but also as instruments for attempted improvement and transformation through the act of linguistic translation towards a *Reine Sprache* (Benjamin 1996, 253–63; Cavalletti 2022, 101–121; Dogà 2021, 269–290).

Conclusion: The Mythological Machine

From Jesi’s perspective, the core of myth is hindered by formidable barriers and insurmountable walls. Jesi illustrates this idea through the concept of the mythological machine. While penetrating these barriers to reach the

epicentre of myth may prove impossible, what remains empirically observable is the continuous production of a mythological machine.

What is the mythological machine? We call it a machine because it is something that works and, on empirical investigation, appears to be something that works automatically. On the one hand, it can be observed that the mythological machine is characterised as that whose functioning produces mythologies: tales “about gods, divine beings, heroes and descents into Hades”. On the other hand, it turns out that the mythological machine is characterised as that whose functioning gives partial respite to the hunger for myth *ens quatenus ens*. By its functioning presence, the machine casts doubt on this ontological determination of myth, placing myth in pre-being, and produces mythologies that are not even *entes quatenus entes*, but *entes* insofar as they are produced by the machine.

(Jesi 1977, 196)

The concept of the mythological machine should not be approached from an ontological or metaphysical standpoint. Instead, it should be viewed as pure functionality. Acting as an assembly line of sorts, the mythological machine gathers diverse mythological elements and translates them into digestible forms, akin to the process of culinary science (Jesi 1979b, 174–182). Additionally, the “mythological machine” can be described as an “anthropological machine”: “The sophisticated mechanism that generates images of human beings, serving as anthropological models that relate to both the self and others, encompassing various forms of diversity (i.e. of extraneousness to the self)” (Jesi 2013, 81). Jesi emphasises the importance of understanding the inner workings, mechanisms, and structures of this anthropological machine as they manifest in the literary mythopoetic works of artists, poets, or narrators.⁷

In conclusion, Jesi’s viewpoint emerges as basically sceptical and demystifying, therefore facing literary figures that intensify myth through esotericism, there appears to be a call for demythisation.⁸ This call entails considering all myths not as inherently true or false, but as potentially dangerous; contemporary philosophers of ideology like Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin understood that certain mythical revelations can drift into ideological and political realms. Therefore, it becomes imperative to devalue the seductive and influential nature of myth through critical analysis of mythopoeic and literary mechanisms. Jesi’s perspective could be likened to mythocritique (Cometa 2004, 290–302), akin to forensic investigation, seeking to uncover the root causes behind a myth’s demise. This “autopsy” (Jesi 2000, 95) can only be conducted *a posteriori*, that is, after the effects of the myth have unfolded.

Notes

- 1 Jesi's examination of the science of myth from the modern era onward encompasses the viewpoints of several authors, including Charles-François Dupuis, Philip Karl Buttmann, Karl Otfried Muller, Creuzer, Bachofen, Wilamovitz, Cassirer, Eliade, Malinowski, Friedrich Walter Otto, Dumézil, Jung, Kerényi, and Lévi-Strauss.
- 2 Jesi believes that the use of alchemy as a key to interpret a literary work is viable, especially when one is confronted with "narratives in which nonsense predominates" (Jesi 2020, 122). To illustrate this point, Jesi playfully offers a concise alchemical interpretation of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, suggesting that "an alchemical reading can be justified if there is evident indication of the author's engagement with alchemy and esotericism" (Jesi 2020, 123).
- 3 The exploration of the interplay between esotericism and literature can be extended to historical figures. Jesi delves into the figure of the magician and esotericist John Dee, associating him with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (Jesi 1990, 144–151). Prospero, the protagonist of *The Tempest*, is likened to Dee, not only for his profound intellectual and occult ambitions or his extensive library, but primarily for his role as a manipulator and dissembler within the theatrical realm. Meanwhile, Ben Jonson draw parallels between Dee and Kelley portraying them not as practitioners of witchcraft or dark arts, but as charlatans and fraudsters akin to the alchemists *Subtle and Face* in the play.
- 4 Within this framework, Jesi emphasises the presence of myth within the demystifying and desacralising discourses of the Enlightenment. He proposes an exploration of Enlightenment mythologies, focusing on the involvement of esoteric and religious circles, groups, and individuals that historically influenced the Enlightenment, including Sabbatianism (17–41), the Holy Alliance (43–66) German Pietism (67–80) (Jesi 1990).
- 5 One might assume that while right-wing culture freely utilises "ideas without words", left-wing culture relies solely on "words without ideas". However, this oversimplified dichotomy does not accurately reflect the complexities of political discourse. Even within the language of the left, described by Jesi as "the most dynamitard one" (Jesi 1979, 8), there exists a utilisation of "ideas without words". Moreover, Jesi, though openly aligning himself with Marxism and contributing editorially to the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL), acknowledges the presence of a mythical dimension within left-wing culture. This dimension manifests not only in slogans provoking political stances but also in the encouragement of revolt and rebellion. Further references can be found in the text *Spartakus. Simbologia della rivolta* (*Spartakus. The symbology of the revolt* 2000), examining the Spartacus League (*Spartakusbund*), a Berlin insurrection movement aimed at toppling the ruling Social Democratic Party by seizing the "symbols of power" (Jesi 2000, 22) within the Berlin parliament. In this framework, Jesi distinguishes revolt from revolution. Revolt, exemplified by movements like the Spartacist uprising, is characterised by a "sudden insurrectional outburst" (Jesi 2000,

- 19) – an end in itself driven by instincts and internal frustrations, seeking a suspension of historical time. In contrast, revolution entails a “strategic complex of insurrectional movements” (Jesi 2000, 19), leading to a radical transformation within historical time. In this “shining and secret book” (Cavalletti 2014, 503), maybe regarded as Jesi’s most esoteric work, one can discern connections with Marxist Wilhelm Reich’s insights into managing the masses’ drives and their discharge of energies.
- 6 Jesi notes that within Italy’s historical and cultural landscape, there has been a limited inclination towards embracing esotericism, largely due to the overwhelming dominance of Catholic culture. Movements like Freemasonry were more aligned with “an anticlerical, liberal, and Risorgimento-oriented stance rather than ‘secretive centers’” (Jesi, 1979, 89). Moreover, the Theosophical Society failed to establish a significant presence during the era of Italian fascism; instead, Jesi highlights the popularity of figures such as Mantegazza and Lombroso (Jesi 1979, 90). Fascist ideology often drew mythical and exoteric inspiration from Imperial Rome, venerating it as a symbol of historical grandeur and offering a tangible past to aspire towards.
 - 7 If every writer could be associated with a mythological or anthropological machine, one that often fails to completely hide its strategies of dissimulation, prestidigitation, and self-estrangement within the act of writing, this concept could also be applied to Jesi. While this analysis has not delved into Jesi’s literary works, it is noteworthy that he authored two novels, *La casa incantata* and *L’ultima Notte*, both featuring the mythical and modern vampires. Considering this, an approach that intertwines Jesi’s non-fiction with his fiction (Tenuta 2010, 413–438; Zignol 2000, 279–327), as well as an interpretation that connects his fiction with his biography (Schiavoni 2015, 100; Vitzizzai 2015, 115) could offer pathways for an esoteric analysis of his literary creations.
 - 8 In this chapter, Jesi’s entire relationship with the Jewish religion remains unaddressed. It should be pointed out that Jesi identifies the phenomenon of demythisation within mystical and kabbalistic traditions prior to the Enlightenment (Jesi 1990, 18–41). Despite his avowed atheism, Jesi maintains a profound affinity for the Jewish spirituality, as evidenced by his close connection with Scholem. Their epistolary exchange reveals Jesi’s acknowledgment of his own “Jewish blood” (Lucca 2013, 114) and his theological struggle, where attempts to define the “deepest essence of being” feel inherently “blasphemous” (Lucca 2013, 113). Moreover, Jesi’s poetic collection *Esilio*, composed between 1963 and 1969 and published in 1970, offers another lens through which to explore his personal engagement with Kabbalistic thought. Within these verses, Jesi explores the theme of exile not as a romanticised notion but as a profound exploration of its mystical and existential tensions.

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6 Kabbalah and Romanticism

James von Orelli

How can we express in words what we are not able to imagine in the slightest?
-Johann Georg Hamann

Introduction

In the Babylonian Talmud, in the seventh chapter of tractate Sanhedrin, there is a strange passage which tells of two Rabbis, Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Oshaya. These two “would sit every Shabbat eve in studying the *Sefer Yetzirah*, by means of which they created a third-grown calf, and ate it”. To this passage is added the commentary “if the righteous desired it, they could be creators” (*Talmud*, Sanhedrin 65b, 446). The *Sefer Yetzirah* is one of the most enigmatic yet significant texts in Jewish mysticism, presenting itself as a speculation as to how God spoke the cosmos into being with an ontology of the Hebrew alphabet.¹ The majority of the text is given over to accounts of the different letters, their organisation and correspondence with the body, the elements, the cardinal directions, and so on. The text itself is incredibly polysemic with its terminology appearing to shift meaning even within the text. There is little consensus regarding the text’s meaning, beyond the fundamental idea that creation occurred by means of language and that if one understands the linguistic principles, if one can interpret them correctly, then one might participate in creation just as the two Rabbis did. This idea, mediated through various commentaries and diverse interpretations, becomes the source for the linguistic speculations of the Kabbalists. The interpretive proliferation initiated by the *Sefer Yetzirah* models the indeterminacy of textual exegesis and instantiates the linguistic metaphysics found throughout the Kabbalistic tradition, which, in turn, is variously appropriated, interpreted, and assimilated, not least by the philosophers of Romanticism, a juncture that indicates an esoteric kernel at the core of modern European philosophy.

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The Kabbalistic interest of the Early German Romantics is one of the most interesting intersections of philosophy and esotericism, but has received relatively little scholarly attention.² However, the uptake of Kabbalistic themes by the Romantics is often implicit yet surprisingly consistent. It is possible to find affinities between the movements, with both emerging in reaction to an influential yet overbearing rationalism in the form of Maimonides and Kant respectively. However, the connections run much deeper than circumstantial similarities and “Kabbalah” is repeatedly the term the Romantics turn to when characterising their own work. Though strange, and often highly mediated, the tradition of Jewish mysticism is incorporated into the writings of the Romantics in innovative forms, with the esoteric and the philosophical unified in a complex knot of combinatory ideas around linguistics, aesthetics, and theology. The Romantic engagement with Kabbalah is informed by the syncretic Christian Kabbalah of the late Renaissance, along with critical and historicising accounts of the Kabbalah that emerged in the Enlightenment.³ However, Romanticism adapts this tradition to its own distinctly philosophical needs. Further, there is not simply a single direction of influence – it is not only philosophy that adapts esoteric Kabbalah for its own ends. Rather the modern study of Kabbalah takes its cue, in part, from the very philosophy it has shaped via a centring of the linguistic and aesthetic in place of the metaphysical. This chapter concentrates on three philosophers that typify this specific mode of philosophy-esotericism, their subsequent reception in Gershom Scholem’s academic study of Kabbalah, and makes the case that Kabbalah is more than simply a trope or metaphor in Romanticism, but rather is part of the tradition. This starts with Johann Georg Hamann’s adoption of Kabbalah as a model for his linguistic philosophy, theologically informed and primarily oriented at aesthetics. Though he is not typically historicised as a Romantic, those areas in which he engages Kabbalah – language, hermeneutics, and aesthetics – are those that are most influential on the following generation, the Early Romantics. This turn is picked up by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis a generation later, who intensify the work Hamann began, taking the Kabbalah as a paradigm of aesthetic language. Romantic philosophy becomes an aesthetic recoding of the Kabbalah and it is precisely this consequential recoding that Scholem folds back into the tradition.

Jürgen Habermas has noted that “the legacy of the Kabbalah already flowed into and was absorbed by Idealism” (Habermas 2014, 37). However, this absorption carries as its corollary an all too common anti-semitic element that cannot be ignored. Christian assimilations of the Kabbalah typically distorted and disparaged Jewish practice, typified by *De Arte Cabalistica* by Johann Reuchlin (a key Christian disseminator of the Kabbalah); Moshe Idel describes Reuchlin’s failure to portray Kabbalists

as they understand themselves (Reuchlin 1993, xxi). This attitude persists into the Enlightenment and beyond with Hamann often adopting a mode of theological supersessionism that maintains a genuine appreciation of Judaism, but only as a precursor to Christianity.⁴ This approach results in an expropriation of Jewish culture into Christian and thus erases it as *Jewish*. Hamann's complex relation to Judaism is apparent in his correspondence with Mendelssohn, a representative of the Enlightenment with whom Hamann has a major dispute over religious and social attitudes, manifesting in a disagreement on the place and status of Judaism. Hamann envisions himself as defending Judaism against Mendelssohn even though he is Jewish. For Hamann, "by reducing Judaism to general rational elements – the 'Law' – Mendelssohn emptied it of its most important religious element, namely language" (Levy 1984, 304). Mendelssohn's Judaism is for Hamann a distortion oriented to provide a rational account of religion and minimise its specificity. Despite this disagreement, Hamann is quite tolerant of his friend's religion and William Alexander argues that he is surprisingly unprejudiced considering his context: "Hamann bases tolerance not on religious indifferentism, but on the most firm religious conviction" (Alexander 1966, 120). Hamann actually seeks to avoid the insidious folding of the Kabbalah into Christian religious history with its expunging of Jewish elements, and at the same time criticises what he sees as tepid rationalising that abstracts anything concrete from religion (Sinn 2004, 40). Thus, Hamann has no qualms advocating religious difference while maintaining that Judaism has been rightly superseded by Christianity. Especially with topics such as the Kabbalah, readers of his work must be sensitive to these complexities in which antisemitism can emerge inconspicuously.

The Early Romantics also have a complex relation to antisemitism. Schlegel was married to Mendelssohn's daughter, Dorothea, and their relationship was one of the most well-known Christian-Jewish love affairs to emerge from the Berlin Salons of the late 1700s. Both Schlegel and Novalis sought to establish a philosophy of love that could be a model for society that "hinges upon the elision of religious difference", an attitude that demonstrates an intentional inclusion of Jewish people in a society that often excluded them (Garloff 2016, 16). However, the omission of religious difference effaces specifically Jewish difference and makes it impossible to name, to philosophise about it, to address it as at all meaningful. This is inclusion at the expense of particularity. Further to this, in his 1799 *Christenheit oder Europa*, Novalis develops a pseudo-mythical notion of the Christian state (S.III, 507). Here he attempted to ground the state in a shared religious culture of Christianity and suggest that faith could form the basis for a virtuous allegiance to the state, necessarily excluding non-Christians from becoming citizens. Frederick Beiser claims neither Novalis

nor Schlegel developed “the anti-Jewish implications of their concept”, though it was influential on the next generation of Romantics who held plainly antisemitic views (Beiser 2020, 158). These considerations are neither to exonerate these authors, nor to condemn their development of Kabbalistic ideas. The Romantic adoption of the Kabbalah is historically and philosophically interesting, but the subject requires care so as not to uncritically repeat antisemitic aspects of that adoption.

Hamann

Hamann’s subtitle to *Aesthetica in Nuce*, “A Rhapsody in Kabbalistic Prose”, has been the cause of much interpretive speculation on the exact place of Kabbalah in Hamann’s thought. Here, Hamann takes on the guise of a Kabbalistic philologist in order to adopt a Kabbalistic way of writing. The Kabbalah becomes a style for Hamann, embracing a form of irony as what is stated is not identical with what is meant and the meaning is displaced within the text. Even Mendelssohn agrees with Hamann’s self-designation, pejoratively characterising his writing as “Kabbalistic rapture” as Hamann “drives his prejudices to excess” with “a mishmash of satirical raptures, witty leaps in the air, flowery allusions, bloated metaphors, critical oracular sayings” (Mendelssohn 1762, 172–88). More recently, Gwen Griffith-Dickson contends that “Kabbalah is associated with hermeneutics for Hamann”, and is a motif that specifically pertains to interpretation of that which is abstruse: Kabbalah “clearly implies the understanding of a text which is difficult, obscure, whose meaning is not to be found on the surface” (Griffith-Dickson 1995, 82). Thus, Griffith-Dickson believes that Kabbalah is a term employed metaphorically by Hamann and “one must not take Hamann’s use of the word too literally here; indeed, it is surprising that some do” (Griffith-Dickson 1995, 83).

Other scholars, however, seek to take Hamann at his word and find in him a genuine Kabbalist. Of note here is Peter Kraft, who claims that early Kabbalistic textual imagery is apparent in Hamann’s *Aesthetica*: “The books ‘Yetzirah’ and ‘Zohar’ lend their treasure trove of images over long stretches, or rather their world is expressed clearly enough in Hamann’s images” (Kraft 1963, 25). Equally, Christian Sinn argues “the Kabbalah forms the entire *Aesthetica in Nuce* like a blueprint” (Sinn 2004, 42). Sinn goes on to give an account of this mapping and attempt to justify his literal reading in its rather overwrought particulars. Though notable, the interpretations of Kraft and Sinn are far too quick in harmonising Hamann with the tradition of Kabbalah. For Hamann, Kabbalah is certainly both a trope, pertaining to hermeneutics, and something genuinely revelatory. But rather than being a secret Kabbalist, Hamann develops Kabbalistic ideas, turns them towards the aesthetic and the hermeneutic, and establishes an

original line of thought that goes on to influence Romanticism. This may still be characterised as Kabbalistic, though it remains decisively distinct from both the traditional Jewish Kabbalah and the Renaissance Christian Kabbalah that preceded it.

While Hamann's referral to the Kabbalah is clear in his work, the textual sources for his understanding of the Kabbalah are more difficult to trace. He had certainly read some Reuchlin and Solomon Glassius, and had at least heard of Ficino, Paracelsus, and Agrippa. The association of several of these names with Kabbalah was mediated through the work of René Rapin, which Hamann had translated (N.IV, 63). It is here that Francis Bacon is associated with the Kabbalah by Rapin, an important connection for Hamann, who cites Bacon in *Aesthetica in Nuce* in justification of his Kabbalistic rhapsody. Though Bacon is critical of Kabbalistic interpretation, Hamann refers to him on the priority of parables, an idea that is founded on a syncretic harmonisation of diverse ancient traditions and allows for an understanding of poetry as a mode of divine revelation (Bacon 1857, 523). Despite Bacon's ambivalence to the tradition, his notion of a syncretic originary revelation that is mediated by the Hebrews in poetic or parabolic form is taken up by Hamann in his *Aesthetica in Nuce*, allowing Hamann to claim that "poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race" (N.III, 197). This entails a double move, first justifying Hamann's use of allusion in adopting this ancient style – in his own words, he will "speak with you in gestures" (N.II, 201). Second, Hamann performs the necessity of hermeneutics in the emphasising of texts as aesthetic. That is to say, his meaning is in no way clear and the reader is compelled to interpret what they read beyond that which is simply stated, a mode of reading that is a constitutive element of the Kabbalah. Hamann performatively alludes to a tradition of allusion so as to justify his elliptical writing style and indicate a sensitivity for the interpretive dynamics of concealment and revelation. This is quite clear in the Kabbalist emphasis on the role of language in creation and thus the formative, *aesthetic* role of language. The interpretability of aesthetics is the central thesis of *Aesthetica in Nuce* and justifiably understood as pertaining to Kabbalah. It is for this reason that in a 1762 letter to Lindner, Hamann compares his own enigmatic writing to a "Kabbalistic child" (ZH. II, 149).

Interpretive Language

In a 1785 letter to Friedrich Jacobi, Hamann wrote: "Language – the mother of reason and revelation, its A and Ω" (ZH. V, 108). Christoph Schulte comments that this idea both "marks the point of convergence of the Romantics against the pure reason of the Enlightenment" and "is the focus of the Romantic reception of the Kabbalah" (Goodman-Thau 1994, 4). This line indicates Hamann's affinity to the Kabbalistic tradition

and his self-conscious adoption of Kabbalistic themes. But this adoption is one of amplification, as demonstrated in Hamann's approving citation of Leibniz: "There is Kabbalah or word-divinations not only in the Hebraic language-mysteries, but also in every language; not, to be sure, to be found in literal speculative interpretations, but in the right understanding and use of words" (N.III, 23). What Hamann understands by Kabbalah is not, as the traditional Kabbalah would have it, the specificity of the Hebrew language in its privileged relation to creation as expressed in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Rather Hamann fosters a more thoroughgoing linguistic philosophy in which every utterance is subject to the interpretive possibilities of sacred language. In other words, ordinary quotidian language is also a source for revelation via a "right understanding" – a clear development and expansion of the linguistic focus of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Reason and reality are revealed through language, with the Bible being the model for such revelation and not its limit (Levy 1984, 323).

Part of Hamann's turn to Kabbalah in his *Aesthetica* is his critique of Enlightenment philologist, Johann David Michaelis. Michaelis espoused an historical-critical interpretation of Scripture, to which Hamann took umbrage, specifically concerning Michaelis' commentary on Robert Lowth's 1753 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. In his opposition, Hamann clearly noticed that Michaelis had harshly judged the Kabbalists from a philological point of view:

The Jews ascribe to the Hebrew language a special sanctity and a completely divine origin, down to all the small features of the letters, in which the Kabbalist searches for manifold secrets. They reckon among its divine virtues that it expresses the essence of things, which is the opinion of a whole credulous multitude of Christians.

(Michaelis 1757, 88)

Michaelis criticises the fundamental Kabbalistic idea that the Hebrew language is the medium of creation and therefore has a direct connection to the essence of the created – a conflation of sign and signified; that in the language of the divine, the name is identical with its object. Thus, every element of language down to the particularities of each letter cannot be understood as incidental, but must reveal something of the divine. Michaelis does not entertain this Kabbalistic notion, instead regarding the features of Hebrew as ultimately arbitrary (Michaelis 1757, 90). Hamann opposes this view, finding language to be something holy and revelatory in its minutiae. He cannot abide Michaelis' "sober and modest" approach to the scriptures which allows him to become "a master in Israel" and yet still fail to understand their meanings (N.II, 201-2). Hamann embraces Kabbalah as an antidote to Michaelis' desiccated approach to language;

his Kabbalistic style allows him to counter Michaelis' insensitivity to theological meaning with a superabundance of meaning.

Hans-Martin Lumpp maintains that understood in the context of Hamann's response to Michaelis, this approach to Kabbalah should not be taken seriously, but simply as a corrective excess. Lumpp is critical of Kraft in particular for projecting onto Hamann a Kabbalism that does "not stand up to precise textual interpretation" (Lump 1970, 31). However, while Kraft may indeed exaggerate in his eagerness to find definitive connections between Hamann and Kabbalah, Hamann's self-designation as Kabbalistic surpasses a relation of metaphor. Lumpp is correct in understanding that "Michaelis must have been disgusted to receive a critique of his work that purported to be Kabbalistic" and this was surely a motivating factor for Hamann to adopt the epithet (Lump 1970, 32). But further, Hamann turns to the Kabbalah for its historical and theological connection with language. Hamann's Kabbalism emerges primarily through his style, but this is also indicative of a specific approach to language as creative which necessitates its own performance – Hamann performs his philosophy of language *in* language. His works are both concerned with aesthetics and are in themselves aesthetic. In this sense, Hamann adopts the Kabbalah for his own purposes, developing it in an idiosyncratic form that moves beyond the purview of traditional Kabbalah, but retaining clear and surprising affinities, even where Hamann does not necessarily intend.

Hamann's insistence that language supersedes the discursive – that it is revelatory and in some sense sacred – is the reason that his approach to language is most fully developed in his critical responses to the representatives of the Enlightenment theories of language. The critical orientation of his work allows Hamann to philosophically undermine Enlightenment theories with a mystical, esoteric tradition. The obscurity of Hamann's Kabbalistic style and the encoding of theological content impels his reader to search for a meaning with the insinuation that it contains secrets. Hamann's emphasis on the hermeneutic quality of Kabbalah is not novel, but can be found already in Reuchlin, who even argued for trinitarian understandings of the various names of God (Reuchlin 1993, 339). Joseph Dan suggests that "Reading *De Arte Cabalistica* one gets an impression that the Kabbalah is mainly an exegetical phenomenon, which employs non-semantic methodologies to discover secrets concerning other non-semantic elements of language, especially the secret names of God" (Dan 1997, 80). This is the trajectory that Hamann adopts and develops in his own work, finding the Kabbalah a distinctly useful point of reference in its capacity to point towards a critical hermeneutic.

Further, in the Jewish Kabbalah, the various interpretive techniques often move the linguistic considerations far beyond parameters of communicability. The names of God are shown to be strings of characters that

have lost all syntactic meaning and are instead treated as instantiations of mystical language. For example, the early Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Bahir*, gives an account of the 72-letter name of God which is ultimately derived from Exodus 14: 19–21, but read as a boustrophedon, and then enmeshing the letters of the three verses. This process utterly undoes any discursive meaning and renders the passage essentially gibberish, an almost random mix of Hebrew letters, which are then treated by the Kabbalists as one of the most holy names of God (Dan 1996, 239). Thus, one is left with a series of letters which are on the surface totally void of meaning and then to which layers upon layers of interpretation aggregate, discovering or inventing a surfeit of meaning. Dan, summarises this approach: “Mystical language represents the rejection of magical language together with any other language of communication, replacing them with semiotic signs representing the unknown and the meta-linguistic in an imprecise, non-semantic manner” (Dan 1996, 248). Communication is dispensed with in favour of discovering a more fundamental content to the linguistic and so a more fundamental aspect of the divine.

Hamann does not engage in such linguistic processes or morphological permutations to excise communicative meaning from his work. Rather the flood of references, puns, hints, allusions, analogies, and metaschematisms serve to efface communicative clarity. Hamann is in agreement with the Kabbalistic approach, that the reader should be able to find more in the text than its plain meaning. In her discussion of Hamann’s hermeneutics, Griffith-Dickson argues that for Hamann:

The interpreter must have the courage to be a Kabbalist; that is, to say more than the text does, not to express oneself but to say what the author left unsaid. The fruits of such faithful creativity may be impossible to “justify” or “verify” to the demands of the objectivist.

(Griffith-Dickson 1995, 338)

Again, Hamann develops on the Kabbalistic tradition; it is not only the names of God that are to be examined for hidden meanings, not only the non-communicative, rather it is all language that becomes the site of possible revelation. Thus, Hamann is engaged in the “in the infinite combination of arbitrary signs” that can be so full of meaning in the midst of their arbitrariness (N.II, 203). Hamann’s basis for this is the belief in a God who chooses to reveal himself, which is to say, to limit himself into understandable forms. It is this self-limitation of the infinite divine, not wholly dissimilar to the Kabbalistic “tzimtzum”, that gives language its potency to the extent that Hamann can outstrip the traditional Kabbalah in terms of interpretive potentiality (Terezakis 2012, 182). It is for this reason that prior even to his published writing, Hamann begins his reflections on the Bible with the exultation “God an author!” (N.I, 5).

Creative Language

As the pursuit of divine names demonstrates, the Kabbalists attempt to forgo the communicative aspects of language in pursuit of further, revelatory significance. In the context of the Christian uptake of these interpretive principles, Dan argues that Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabalistica* "ultimately was positioned in opposition to science, Enlightenment and the communicative use of language" (Dan 1997, 81). This notion of language saying one thing but meaning another feeds into Romantic ideas of irony and lends credence to Hamann's opposition to rationalist linguistic philosophies. Winfried Menninghaus argues that for Hamann, "Kabbalah was the functional epitome of a distancing from the (merely) instrumentalist conception of language" (Menninghaus 1980, 27). Hamann's aversion to what he regarded as the sterilisation of language in its limitation to the communicative is expressed most compellingly in his *New apology of the Letter H*, a critique of the attempts to reform German spelling along rationalist lines. This essay aligns remarkably closely with certain Kabbalistic traditions, though it is unlikely Hamann would have been fully aware of the scope of this correspondence.

The emphasis on the creative power of language beyond its purely communicative aspects in the Jewish tradition is founded on the narrative of God speaking creation into being in the Genesis account. Talmudic tractate Menachot glosses the Genesis narrative and regarding Genesis 2:4, it states:

"These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created [behibare'am]" (Genesis 2:4), read not be-hibare'am, "When they were created," but be-he bera'am, "He created them with the he [ה]"; hence I may say this world was created with the he ... And wherefore was this world created with the he? – Because it is like an *exedra* and whoever wishes to go astray may do so. And wherefore is the [left] leg [of the he] suspended? To indicate that whosoever repents is permitted to reenter.

(*Talmud*, Menachot 29b, 191)

The creative linguistic activity of God is reduced to a single letter and the shape of that letter is analysed for further significance. This approach is instructive for the Kabbalah, finding the entirety of creation summarised in a single letter and equally finding a world of interpretive possibilities in each letter. This is further developed in later Zoharic literature. After narrating a disagreement amongst the sages around the number of words used by God in the process of creation, the *Zohar Midrash ha Ne'lam* repeats the Talmudic claim of a single letter origin: "As it has been taught: Rabbi El'azar said, The blessed Holy One took one letter from His Name, and with that letter [the world] was created ... by He (ה)

the world was created, with one letter” (*Zohar Midrash ha Ne’lam* 2b, 4). The Hebrew letter “he” can be transliterated to the English “h”, a letter that indicates a breath. Andreas Kilcher connects this emphasis on the letter He to Kabbalistic understandings of the Tetragrammaton, the four letter name of God – YHWH, or יהוה, in which He is repeated: “the creative potentiality of divine speaking is condensed in the aspirating letter ‘he’ of God’s name” (Kilcher 1998, 86). In the Kabbalah, all of creation is shown to be founded on the divine breath which also constitutes God’s holy name. The breath itself is a sign for the possibility of speech and so the creation through this letter indicates its own condition of possibility, of creation through divine speech. Furthermore, the breath of God is the animating divine spirit, understood with reference to Genesis 2:7 in which God breathes life into Adam. This idea feeds into the Christian adaptations of Kabbalah, in which a significant mutation occurs; the breath of God becomes associated with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity. This is stated simply and directly by Arcangelo da Borgonuovo in his commentary on the Kabbalistic theses of Pico della Mirandola: “For He ה is the sign of the Holy Spirit” (Aiano 1569, 151). In this way, the Hebrew letter He, the sign of breath, becomes a figure for God via an interpretive tradition that centres the non-communicative.

Hamann’s essay on the letter h fits neatly within the horizon of this tradition. The context for Hamann’s writing of this text were the suggested rational spelling reforms of philologist Christian Tobias Damm. Specifically, Hamann took issue with Damm’s urging that the letter h be excised from German orthography in cases in which it appeared in final position in a word on grounds that it is rationally unnecessary. Thus, Hamann adopts the letter h as a symbol for that which is an obstinate refusal of reason and jumps to its defence. Hamann quickly makes the connection between h and the spirit, arguing that “letters are signs not only of articulated sounds, but often also of syllables and sometimes of word ... it is therefore easy to believe that his philosophical concept of a letter will be sufficiently general to suit also a mere breath or spiritus” (N.III, 93). The single letter is used by Hamann to encompass all that his rationalising adversaries are opposed to, be it the apparently arbitrary quirks of language, or the Holy Spirit. Betz explains that:

the silent letter h, which is an offence to reason, is symbolic not only of life and soul and the invisible creative human spirit, but ultimately of the creative breath of God, whose humble, kenotic presence in Scripture, creation, and the lives of inspired Christians the “enlightened” reformers similarly cannot comprehend.

(Betz 2012, 111)

The h is that which cannot be subsumed by the dictates of a merely human rationality, fully exceeding an interpretive limitation that one might try and place upon it. In line with the earlier Kabbalists, the h becomes for Hamann the sign of the creative spirit of the divine which is also the animating principle of life. Yet he develops this further still; in as much as the h is an aspect of language it is able to speak and Hamann treats this quite literally: “The little letter h ... may speak for itself if there is breath in its nostrils” (N.III, 101). With this, the second half of Hamann’s essay begins, the *New apology of the Letter H by itself*. The h, criticised for its redundancy by rationalist philologists and accused of needlessness in communicative language, responds with its own direct communication: “Your life is what I am – a breath” (N.III, 105). In his own way, Hamann reiterates the Kabbalists’ treatment of the He in his treatment of its German transliteration, the h. It is language and the condition for language, it is irreducible to rational predicates, it names life, breath, spirit, and God.

With this development of the h as a designator of divinity, as a name of God, it becomes possible to discover a final affinity with the Kabbalah. The h operates in Hamann’s writing as the sacred names of God did for the Kabbalists. According to Dan:

In the concept of the holy name of God, language stops being a means and becomes an independent divine essence, in which language and divinity are united. The holy name of God is not an expression of the divine: it is the essence of divinity itself ... God has become a linguistic entity, His essence incorporated within a linguistic phenomenon.

(Dan 1996, 229)

Hamann defends the h, not for its usefulness in communication, but for its indication of the divinity of language, its revelatory capacity even in the arbitrary and superfluous. In this sense it not only refers to God but is expressive of God. In Hamann’s understanding of language as the mother of revelation, one only has to look to language, to take note of its particularities and peculiarities, in order to find a revelation of the divine. The little h might contain everything, just as it did for the Kabbalists, if only one can interpret it correctly, read between the lines, and reveal what is concealed therein.

Hamann’s affinity with the Kabbalah, both deliberately fostered and in places entirely inadvertent, is indispensable for understanding the appropriation of the Kabbalah by the circle at Jena. Hamann’s alteration of the Kabbalistic attention to language into an aesthetic form via his adoption and expansion of a Kabbalistic hermeneutics is instructive for the Romantics. Further, the expression of divinity that the Kabbalists recognised in Scripture is expanded by Hamann in the understanding of language’s own self-expression. Hamann’s voluble h becomes the ground

for the Early German Romantics to further recognise the autonomy of language and potentiate the meanings of the linguistic in a further mediated, de-theologised Kabbalah.

Jena Romanticism

By the start of the nineteenth century, the Jewish Haskalah movement was well underway, with its rejection of mysticism and various emphases on rationalism, liberalism, and integration reorienting Jewish identity, especially in Eastern Europe. Yet it is in this context that the primarily Christian Early German Romantics, congregated in Jena and began to appropriate the Kabbalah (Goodman-Thau 1994, 1). The young authors sought in the perceived antiquity and wisdom of the Jewish mystical tradition a response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which itself included several prominent Jewish figures. Just as Hamann had sought to defend Judaism against Mendelssohn's rationalising conception of religion, so do the Romantics bring esoteric Jewish concepts to bear on the dominant philosophy of the early 1800s. Friedrich Schelling, both associated with the Romantic circle at Jena, and a central figure in the development of German Idealism, incorporated Kabbalistic ideas into his work. These were primarily mediated in the work of Friedrich Oetinger, and notions such as the Ein-Sof and Tzimtzum are particularly notable (Goodman-Thau 1994, 1).

However, it is in the work of Schlegel and Novalis that the influence of Hamann's stylistic and linguistic approach is most evident: "Hamann's concept of style in the Kabbalah proves to be a model for a series of early Romantic writing procedures. As with Hamann, the starting point is the interpretation of the Kabbalah as a procedure of exegesis" (Kilcher 1998, 269). It is the linguistic elements of the Kabbalah, rather than theological or metaphysical, that most engaged the Romantics in their own project of the poeticisation of philosophy. According to Marina Aptekman, Kabbalistic linguistic mysticism drew the Romantics to adopt the label for themselves over other esoteric discourses for in its doctrines they saw "an aesthetic, semiotic code of creation, which had existed before creation and was used as a matrix for creation" (Aptekman 2011, 110). The Kabbalah could exemplify the creative, poetic potential of language along with the infinitude of interpretation, hence Schlegel can claim "The true poetic aesthetic is Kabbalah" (KSA. 26, 305). With this, the Kabbalah is cemented under its new aesthetic rubric as a linguistic theory of creation and interpretation (Menninghaus 1980, 31). The purpose of the Romantic adoption of the Kabbalah then was not to legitimise Christian hermeneutics, as was Hamann's intention, nor a turn to mysticism. Rather, Romanticism endeavours to construct "an aesthetic language paradigm from the

linguistic theorems of the early modern Kabbalah” (Kilcher 1998, 240). This is not to say that the Romantics are rightly categorised as Kabbalists, or that they conceived of themselves as such, but rather that the Kabbalah became a resource that they could draw upon and a tradition that they were able to develop in new and philosophically interesting ways.

While the work of Hamann was of vital importance to the Jena circle, they were also aware of the Christian Kabbalah of Mirandola, Reuchlin, and Jakob Boehme (KSA. 18, 219). Novalis had a particular enthusiasm for Boehme’s theosophical writings (S.II, 754). Further, Kristine Hannak recounts later Enlightenment proponents, such as Friedrich Nicolai, would use the term “Behmenist” to criticise those who wrote in an obscure and incomprehensible style, namely “the *Athenäum*, the leading journal of the Romantics, and its editor, Friedrich Schlegel” (Hessayon 2013, 165). Schlegel, just as Hamann before him, found something significant in the non-communicative use of language and part of his recourse to Kabbalah was precisely the justification of incomprehensibility in the dynamics of interpretation and poetics. He understood Boehme’s Kabbalah to be distinctly aesthetic rather than theological. Schlegel and Novalis constitute a development on the Hamannian adoption of Kabbalah, both individually contributing to a shared Romantic project.

Schlegel – Infinite Language

It is in Hamann’s wake that Schlegel is able to further develop a Kabbalah of aesthetics. This aestheticisation also becomes a process of secularisation, exchanging both the Jewish reflection on tradition and Hamann’s Christian hermeneutics for a conception of language to which both theology and philosophy are subject. Walter Benjamin recognises this, suggesting that the Romantics completed “the secularisation of the mystical tradition” (Benjamin 2003, 154). With the Romantics then, the Kabbalah is fully expropriated from its Jewish context, secularised and used to develop a linguistic, poetic philosophy (Sinn 2004, 38). Like Hamann, this poetic philosophy is oriented on encoding and decoding; the Kabbalah is an exegetical project for Schlegel (KSA. 19, 177). However, it is not only an interpretive framework that is based on the Kabbalah, but the esoteric tradition also models a poetic rather than communicative mode of writing (Kilcher 1998, 271). So as in Hamann, the emphasis on the aesthetic-productive aspects of the Kabbalah is apparent in Schlegel too, informing his own methods of writing and lending him a similar stylistic quality, that is, one of incomprehensibility.

Schlegel addresses his Kabbalistic style quite self-consciously in his essay *On Incomprehensibility*, itself a comment on the *Athenäum*, in which Schlegel had published several collections of his own and others’

fragmentary writings. It is in this essay that Schlegel seeks to justify the use of incomprehensible prose as part of his philosophical project. Here, the poetic processes that have led to Schlegel's adoption of allusion, quotation, contradictions, jokes, and indecipherable assertions are reflexively identified as "the great frenzy of such Kabbalah" (KSA. 2, 364). Even this allusion to the Jewish esoteric tradition is not explained in the text, compounding its enigmatic quality and enacting the very semiological frenzy of which it itself speaks. This mention of Kabbalah can be interpreted as a reference to either Hamann and the writing style of his Kabbalistic philologist, or to Salomon Maimon, Kabbalist-turned-philosopher (Kilcher 1998, 271). Whatever the specificities of Schlegel's intention with this oblique reference, the consequent multiple interpretation precisely instantiates his primary point in the text; the interpretive possibilities for any piece of writing are independent of their author, and subsequently are essentially limitless. It is for this reason Schlegel can claim that "words often understand themselves better than do those who use them" (KSA. 2, 364). The Kabbalah indicates for Schlegel the proliferating misunderstandings that are the means by which poetry might continue to develop and the autonomous nature of language that escapes determination by those who wield it, just like Hamann's *h*. That is to say, in his interpretation, Schlegel treats the Kabbalah Kabbalistically, reinterpreting the tradition, proliferating and permutating without end.

The infinitude of esoteric meaning generated through the technical decoding techniques of the Kabbalah is embraced by Schlegel and becomes in the words of Kilcher "virtually hermetic, closed, inaccessible immanence of a self-perpetuating language" (Kilcher 1998, 272). For Schlegel, Kabbalah is not only aesthetics, but also identical with "infinite grammar" (KSA. 18. 386). This infinitude is firmly founded on the tradition of renewing the text through its disruption, reordering, and recombination that is found throughout the Kabbalah. For example, such techniques of textual upheaval can be found in Pico's interpretation of *temurah* in which letters are interchanged and combined to form new words, which Pico terms "alphabetical revolution" (*alphabetaria revolutio*), in turn founded on Jewish Kabbalistic practices traceable for example in Abraham Abulafia's *Sheva netivoth ha-Tora* (Kilcher 1998, 293).⁵ Schlegel's adoption of such interpretive licence fuels his linguistic orientation towards the infinite, building on Hamann's hermeneutics. As such, Schlegel claims he has the desire to produce "an infinite book", a text that is not hemmed in by preconceived limitations of discursive discreteness (S.III, 363). In this way, the aesthetic transformation of the Kabbalah under Romanticism secularises the tradition by replacing the divine with the philosophical concept of the infinite. For Schlegel, the progressive poetry of Romanticism that proliferates interpretation is the means by which the infinite might be

accessed through the finite, each finite instantiation of language opening up a flood of possible interpretations through the dynamics of irony, misunderstanding, and hermeneutical creativity.⁶ For Schlegel, even the turn to Kabbalah, as a Kabbalistic move, must itself be subject to the same interpretative potentiation as all else that is linguistically captured. Thus, Kabbalah, itself multiplicatively interpretable, and its aestheticisation within Romanticism, are encoded within the Kabbalah, by its reference to and performance of Kabbalistic semiotic practices. In its absolutisation, Kabbalah maintains an ironic edge.

This absolutising of the Kabbalah as an aesthetic-linguistic paradigm is part of Schlegel's attempt to poeticise philosophy. Hence, he can claim that "the connection between the infinite and the finite is more a question of Kabbalah than of philosophy" (KSA. 18, 318). For Schlegel, such ongoing linguistic potential figures the Romantic philosophical interest in infinitude far better than the philosophy of his day. However, this attitude does not dissuade Schlegel from identifying idealist philosophy as a type of Kabbalah when it too seeks to engage the infinite: "Critical philosophy is a Kabbalah of reason" (KSA. 18. 320). Rather than undermining his aesthetic focus, this broadening designation of Kabbalistic elucidates Schlegel's aesthetic understanding of philosophy and his readiness to substitute one mode of discourse for another in a manner he associates with Kabbalah. Kabbalah is fully absorbed into Schlegel as part of the form and content of his philosophical performance, and emerges at several points in various notes and fragments as part of an equation or formula. Schlegel writes that "Kabbalah = astrology + magic + Bible or Gospel" and "Poetry = absolute science + absolute art = magic = alchemy + Kabbalah" (KSA. 18, 386; 19, 20; 16, 405). First, these equations directly demonstrate Schlegel's thematisation of the substitutability and combinability of various discourses, though non-hierarchically and non-logically. Magic appears as a constituent element of Kabbalah and as being constituted by it as well. Second, in their role as poetical-mathematical abstractions, they perform precisely what Schlegel conceived of as the Kabbalah. Through their syntax, they are linguistic permutations that draw parallels, construct interpretive latencies, and haphazardly index meaning. This doctrine of combinatory signification is worked out in conjunction with Novalis.

In this way, Schlegel renders the Kabbalah as a trope of poetic language, both in its interpretive potential but also in its application in the midst of linguistic frenzy. Kilcher explains: "Poetry, like magic, alchemy and Kabbalah, owes its magical power to the sympathy between sign and signified, which guarantees the interchangeability and interaction of name and thing" (Goodman-Thau 1999, 163). This means the Kabbalah is deployed in Schlegel as a trope of tropes, and becomes caught up in movements of signification deferral and perpetuation in linguistic terms that could almost

be characterised as post-modern; the frenzy goes on and on, indexing the infinitude of Romantic poesy, the unending interpretive possibility and thus re-aligning itself with a kind of originary Jewish Kabbalistic hermeneutics in which a single verse may be interpreted unnumbered times. Thus, the dynamics of poetic or aesthetic production, and those of interpretation, are Kabbalistic in Schlegel's understanding. Kabbalah is for Schlegel a useful point of reference, an historical precedent and an aesthetically philosophical rubric that is essentially interchangeable with that of Romanticism. Hence, for Schlegel, "Aesthetics = Kabbalah - there is no other" (KSA. 18, 399).

Novalis – Combinatorial Language

Schlegel was not the only member of the Romantic circle at Jena to see in the tradition of Jewish mysticism a resource for the articulation of their philosophy of language. Georg von Hardenberg, known as Novalis, also turned to Kabbalah as a tropological device in restating the relation between reason and language in the paths initially carved out by Hamann. Here, too, the turn to Kabbalah is not for Novalis a reactive turn to an obsolete mystical metaphysics, but rather as a model for the exploration and interpretation of the semiotic properties of language as it appears everywhere. Novalis writes of "Grammatics" as an understanding of the linguistic nature of things: "Man does not speak alone – the universe also speaks – everything speaks – infinite languages" (S.III, 267). Like Schlegel, Novalis pursued this proliferation of language through the combinatorial potential of various discourses as the foundation of an aesthetics. One can unite every discourse if one is simply capable of translating between them, of understanding and interpreting them correctly. In this, Schlegel and Novalis relate the Kabbalah syncretically to alchemy, in which combinatorics is far more significant. While Schlegel is far more linguistically focused in this, drawing his work closer to the traditional Kabbalah, Novalis is much more syncretic, drawing on authors for whom these esoteric categories are already to be thought of as unified, especially Paracelsus. Aptekman explains that "the alchemic interpretation of Kabbalah as a science that fuses mathematical combinations with applied linguistic mysticism and philosophical abstractions certainly appealed to the epistemological beliefs of German Romantics" (Aptekman 2011, 114). Novalis' work is oriented towards a poetic understanding; the construction of a new aesthetic philosophy through synthesising the esoteric, religious, magical, critical, and so on, essentially encyclopaedic in its scope.

Novalis' combinatorial philosophy was likened to the "theological model of a complete knowledge, namely that of the Bible" (Kilcher 1998, 283). The Bible operates metonymically here, standing for the

revelatory capacity of Scripture, as in Hamann, but also its interpretability so as to maintain a perpetual historical relevance. On this front, Novalis questioned: "Who has declared the Bible completed? Should the Bible not be still in the process of growth?" (S.III, 596). Novalis wanted to contribute to an ever-growing, ever-becoming Bible, and he discussed his idea for a secular Bible-project with Schlegel who had first broached the idea of "an infinite book" (S.III, 363). Even though the Romantic project is aestheticising and thus secularising, it is formulated in terms of Scripture and theological language as a model for a holistic account of knowledge. Further, though founded in syncretic combinatorics, Novalis' idea maintains an affinity to the historical Kabbalists' own conception of the Torah. The Kabbalistic account of the scriptures is also a complete totality of knowledge that might be discovered within the text if it can be interpreted correctly. Kilcher makes this connection explicit: "The Kabbalistic tradition's formulation of the Torah, 'turn it over and over, for everything is in it', becomes the principle of a combinatorial encyclopaedia" (Kilcher 1998, 284). Thus, Novalis is likely only partially aware of how Kabbalistic he is when he declares that his book "is to become a scientific Bible – a real, and ideal pattern – and germ of all books" (S.III, 363). Harold Bloom, too, makes much of Novalis' claim, understanding it to be a complete rejection of the closure of the canon, both religious and poetic (Bloom 1999, 98). If the canon is not yet closed, but is rather in an eternal state of becoming as with Romantic poesy, or the Kabbalist interpretation of the Torah, why can it not be added to in new and surprising ways? Bloom uses this as justification for his own rhetorical "misreading" of the Kabbalah, not dissimilarly to the Romantic's own appropriation and continuation of the tradition.

Of course, Novalis' combinatorial project cannot be limited to Kabbalistic considerations and nor does he conceive of the Kabbalah in itself as a primary model for his own project. Rather, it is Paracelsus' alchemical medicinal magic and Fichtean transcendental philosophy that are most significant. Fichte's system is combined with esotericism via a semiotic paradigm – a poeticisation – through which Novalis endeavours to establish an aesthetic theory of knowledge focused on the relation between all things. While there is not the space to examine these two fields here, suffice to say that Novalis reads into both a sympathy of the sign with the signified, something that he labels "one of the basic ideas of Kabbalistics" (S.III, 266). Kabbalah here is not a historical reference point, but is used rhetorically as a model of combinatorics and linguistic mutability. As Kilcher has it: "The question of the 'genuine', 'real' or 'historical' Kabbalah is replaced by the question of its progressive transformation and translation" (Goodman-Thau 1999, 144). In this sense, Novalis' misunderstood appropriation of the tradition is all the more genuinely Kabbalistic.

It seems that Novalis had no traceable connection in his thought to the traditional Jewish Kabbalah, but rather was the recipient of a wholly mediated tradition. This emerged both in Christian Kabbalah but also in critical appraisals of the Kabbalah authored by Enlightenment adherents. While the former sought to reinterpret the mystical tradition for their own religious purposes, the latter addressed the Kabbalah simply to delimit it as an illegitimate field of knowledge, its superstition, and irrationality making it the inverse of Enlightenment principles. Of most significance are Kurt Sprengel's *Attempt at a Pragmatic History of Medicine* and Dietrich Tiedemann's *Spirit of Speculative Philosophy*, who both indict the Kabbalah as a pernicious syncretic philosophy. Thus, Novalis works with a negative image of an already mediated doctrine, yet still attempts to redeem it in his own work. He does not read these Enlightenment historiographies historically, nor for their rationalist critiques of their subject, rather Novalis treats them as a source for concepts that he can apply in his own work. Sprengel's work in particular goes into some detail concerning the Kabbalistic conception of the four worlds of the sephirot and their correspondence, a notion not dissimilar from Novalis' understanding of semiotic relations (Sprengel 1800, 177). With his adversarial interpretation of these texts, Novalis demonstrates how all forms of knowledge might be incorporated into his combinatorial Bible. Even though his aims are antithetical to Enlightenment philosophical norms, that does not stop Novalis from assimilating them as he pleases. He need only discover the correspondences that allow him to translate from an Enlightenment discourse to a hermetic one, to the poetic, and so on.

Novalis' sensitivity to the correspondences in things is also understood linguistically. The sympathy between the sign and the signified gives the wielder of words power over the thing it indicates, an idea gleaned from Boehme's conception of the Adamic language. With this, Hannak explains, "the artist could even work magic – transforming the world with his words and songs" (Hessayon 2013, 171). As well as echoing the Kabbalistic notions of creative language, this idea of the power of words accords with Hamann's h that can talk for itself and endow others with life, or indeed Schlegel's words that understand themselves. Novalis makes it far more explicit than both when he claims in his *Blüthenstaub* that "genuinely poetic language should be organic, alive" (S.II 440). The idea of the living word brings Novalis remarkably close to Kabbalistic discussions of the name of God, the designator of divinity that is itself divine. Novalis even turns to Kabbalistic terminology to speak of these ideas, writing of the "Shemhamephorash – name of the name. The real definition is a magic word" (S.II 592). The Kabbalistic equivocation between God and his name is an exemplar for Novalis' combinatorial linguistic sympathy. Thus, when Novalis hints at the Hebrew tetragrammaton,

writing “four letters denote God to me – a few strokes a million things”, he taps into an existing tradition (S.II 412). Novalis, similarly to Schlegel, draws near endless interpretive connections founded on the abstraction of certain particulars. The Kabbalistic speculations on the strokes of the Hebrew letters amply evidence this affinity. In Novalis too, therefore, does the trope of the Kabbalah become an extension of the Kabbalah. In their engagement with Kabbalah, Schlegel and Novalis articulate a continuation of the tradition, modified almost beyond recognition, filtered through its Christian and subsequent Enlightenment receptions. Romantic Kabbalah hovers on the edge of categorical recognition, irreconcilable with the traditional Jewish Kabbalah, though not totally different from it. Certain aspects of the traditional Kabbalah’s emphasis on language and interpretation find a strange echo in the writings of Hamann, Schlegel and Novalis. Yet enough persists for the connections to be made, not least by the pre-eminent scholar of Kabbalah in the twentieth century, Gershom Scholem.

Scholem

Gershom Scholem initiated the historical study of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism more generally. In 1920, he wrote his doctoral thesis on the *Sefer Bahir*, which was subsequently published as *Das Buch Bahir* (Scholem 1970). However, even prior to this turn to the Kabbalah in his youth, Scholem was already acquainted with the German philosophical tradition. Scholem’s work cannot be neatly organised into a particular lineage, but must be understood as participating in both. Where Romanticism adopted the traditions of the Kabbalah for its own philosophical ends, in Scholem, Romanticism is adopted for work on the Kabbalah. Kilcher claims that when Scholem made his initial turn to the study of the Kabbalah in the years prior to his doctoral dissertation, he “took the Romantic model of aesthetic Kabbalah as his starting point” (Kilcher 1998, 5). Romanticism achieves something of a restitution in the work of Scholem, and thus continues to inform how the traditional Kabbalah was received in non-Jewish contexts into the twentieth century.

Scholem acknowledges his Romantic heritage at several points, most notably in the diaries of his youth. While still a teenager, Scholem wrote of his intentions to delve into Romanticism, writing in 1914: “I’ll need to read up on Romanticism and above all Novalis” (Scholem 2007, 36). It is clear that it was Novalis who first drew Scholem in the direction of the Romantics and the following year Scholem writes that when he reads Novalis (along with Vischer and Cervantes) that his “inner strings sound out their melodies. To put it trivially, I belong to Romanticism” (Scholem 2007, 68). Beyond this felt identification with the tradition for the young Scholem, there are certain aspects of his thought that betray a positively

Romantic attitude. Even at an early stage in his career, Scholem was discerning certain parallels between the Romantic and Jewish traditions, going as far as to affirm a comparison between Hamann and the Talmud (Scholem 2007, 237). The focus on language Scholem found in the Romantic authors would inform his approach to Kabbalah more generally. Kilcher points to the influence of Hamann in the opening line of Scholem's *95 Theses on Judaism and Zionism*: "Judaism should be derived from its language" (Kilcher 2010, 21; Scholem 1995, 289). It seems that Scholem was able to draw connections between the Jewish and Romantic linguistic theories, bringing them full circle and the Romantic concept of language could be indexed to the Kabbalah as the specifically Jewish paradigm of linguistic metaphysics with which Scholem resonated (Kilcher 1998, 339). The form of the *Theses* themselves bridge the gap, concurrently echoing both the fragmentary form preferred by Schlegel and classical collections of Rabbinic sayings (Weidner 2006, 212). It is significant that this early period was also the time of Scholem's most intensive communication with Walter Benjamin, with whom Scholem extensively discussed these themes of language, both Romantic and Kabbalistic.

From 1915 onwards, Scholem and Benjamin frequently visited one another and exchanged several letters discussing linguistic theories. Hamann's ideas of language were influential on Walter Benjamin who cites him approvingly in his 1916 *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (Benjamin 2003, 70). This well-known essay on language was partially conceived of as a response to Scholem. Graeme Gilloch explains that though he was certainly interested in Judaism, "Benjamin's engagement with the Judaic tradition was primarily filtered through the writings of Hamann, Schlegel and Novalis" (Gilloch 2013, 251). Indeed, this is quite evident with Benjamin's later studies in pursuit of his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, which extensively engages the work of Schlegel and Novalis (Benjamin 2003, 116–200). On the other side, Scholem himself is complimentary of Benjamin's work when he writes that Benjamin is "the legitimate continuator of the most fruitful and genuine traditions of Hamann and Humboldt" (Scholem 1976, 241). It is clear that both men connected over their shared appreciation of the metaphysics of language as it emerged in the divergent traditions of Jewish mysticism and Romanticism and that they saw their own work as contributing to a continuation of both, if not their unification.

Scholem continues to cite the Romantics on occasion throughout his writing. In an essay on the divine names, written in the early 1970s, Scholem cites Hamann, claiming that language should be understood as the "mother of reason and revelation, its A and Ω" (ZH.V, 108). Scholem writes: "language should be at once language of revelation and language of

human reason. This is the fundamental thesis of linguistic mysticism, as is indicated by Johann Georg Hamann with masterly laconicism” (Scholem 1972, 62). Hamann ultimately becomes the symbol of the shared root of Kabbalistic and Romantic philosophies of language, allowing Scholem to turn to him as an authority in the midst of an essay on the Kabbalah. In this way, Scholem is able to follow in the footsteps of the Romantic appropriation of the Kabbalah and uncover the aesthetic dimension of linguistic mysticism in the middle of his historical account. The consistency of Scholem’s citation of Hamann is indicative of a greater affinity and even as a motivation of Scholem’s turn to the study of philology. Kilcher argues that Scholem saw his philological work not in purely historical terms, but as a restoration of the Kabbalah in almost messianic terms. Hamann’s Kabbalistic Philology is the activity that is necessary to combat the historicising Enlightenment philosophy that emerges in the early historical-critical philology of Michaelis. Hamann performatively deploys Kabbalah as a hermeneutic principle of finding hidden meanings and thus restoring the vitality of historic texts. In *Philology as Kabbalah*, Kilcher argues convincingly that Scholem conceived of his own work as restorative philology cast in the mould of Hamann, though there is not the space to recapitulate the thesis here (Kilcher 2010, 13–28).

The relation between Romanticism and Kabbalah is not a one-way street, but as well as appropriating elements of the Kabbalah, Romantic philosophy impacts the study of Kabbalah itself. It establishes its philosophising, aestheticising rubric as one of the primary engagements with the historical Kabbalah, explicit “at the edge” or “in the background” of Scholem’s work (Kilcher 1998, 330). Scholem’s *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah* is one such instantiation, often considered peripheral to his major historical work. As the title already suggests, in this work, Scholem abandons his usual perspective of historian in favour of a more philosophical, even poetic approach (Biale 1985, 67–93). The aphoristic form itself might be traced to a Romantic rejection of systematicity. Further, Scholem’s specifically unhistorical prose – such as the discussion of Lurianic Kabbalah with the categories of historical materialism, or the comparison of Kafka’s writings with those of the mediaeval Kabbalah – is evocative of Novalis’ combinatorial approach that ignores historiographical norms. In this, Scholem emerges not as a modern historian, but in the guise of a Romantic; a Romantic writing Kabbalistically, or rather, in the aesthetic language paradigm of a Romantic Kabbalah. This is a paradigm that continues to be voiced and developed in the wake of Scholem in the work of Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida and Jorge Luis Borges (Idel 2002; Alazraki 1988). It is in this sense that Romanticism itself becomes the object of the Kabbalah, absorbed into the “ancient tradition of eternal revelation” in which the two traditions find a strange unity (Kilcher 1998,

303). It is in Scholem, therefore, that the Romantic aestheticisation of the Kabbalah finds its expression, not in a new absolute poetry, but at the margins and peripheries of the historical restoration of the Kabbalah.

Conclusion

In his *A Defense of the Kabbalah*, Borges elucidates how the Kabbalistic premises of divine inspiration and interpretation “turns the Scriptures into an absolute text” and makes them “a book impervious to contingencies, a mechanism of infinite purposes, of infallible variations, of revelations lying in wait, of superimpositions of light” (Borges 2000, 85). The obscurities of the Kabbalah are potential revelations that cannot be circumscribed. Therein lies creative power, aspects of divinity, and a linguistic metaphysics that prefigures developments in modern philosophy. The dynamic of concealment and revelation, so central to the Jewish Kabbalah, remain operative and are even intensified in the philosophies of the Early Romantics. Hamann goes further than the traditional Kabbalah in expanding the hermeneutic possibilities to all language and not only the Hebrew letters of the sacred scriptures and the names of God. Hamann’s use of language, his turn to poetry, his Kabbalistic style, all initiate what might be understood as a development in Kabbalistic practice. Sinn argues that “with his *Aesthetica in Nuce*, Hamann thus sets in motion a process that already far exceeds its own historicity in the idea of Romantic universal poetry” (Sinn 2004, 45). Schlegel’s and Novalis’ thinking of language only expands on Hamann’s, secularising and aestheticising the scriptural absolute text of the Kabbalists into a poetic absolute. For the Romantics, each instantiation of language is subject to its own dynamic of concealment and revelation, through interpretive potential, modulated by irony or poetic combinations. An indeterminacy of obscurity or clarity that remains linguistically potent echoes the Kabbalistic appreciation of the creative power of language which has remained consistent since the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

Yet in this Romantic appropriation of Kabbalah, it remains difficult to speak of influence in a linear sense. The adoption of the paradigm of Romanticism at specific instances in Scholem’s work reveals unilinear articulations of influence to be misguided. Bloom suggests that the Kabbalah’s tendency to be absorbed and thus “contaminated” by “nearly every major occult or theosophical strain in the Renaissance and later in Enlightened Europe” means that the tradition itself is not easily delimited (Bloom 1999, 16). Such an open classification, Bloom claims, justifies or even calls for his own misreading of the tradition as Rhetoric and in this, he is following in the footsteps of the Romantic aestheticisation of the Kabbalah. This aestheticisation understands itself as Kabbalistic and is a move for which Bloom also commends Scholem in his own “rhetorical or figurative” as much as it is historical account of Kabbalah (Bloom 1999, 18).

To conclude, the innovations of Romanticism on Kabbalah, the intensification of interpretive indeterminacy, foreclose on the possibility of summarising the relations between the two in clear categorical terms. The relation is one of irony, in which affinities can be drawn, though they express themselves in ways that are difficult to pin down. However, it is possible to ask with Scholem “does such an element of irony not rather lie in the subject matter of the Kabbalah itself?” (Biale 1985, 70). The Kabbalah of the Romantics is mediated, misunderstood and in some cases, unwitting, while the Romanticism of Scholem is marginal. Yet they are indelibly entwined, each reflecting on the other, revealing something of the other’s obscurities.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works:

- KSA** Schlegel, Friedrich. *Kritische Ausgabe*. 35 vols. Ernst Behler (ed). Munich: Munich Paderborn. 1958
- N** Hamann, Johann. *Sämtliche Werke*. 6 vols. Josef Nadler (ed). Vienna: Herder, 1949–1957
- S** Novalis. *Schriften*. 4 vols. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel (eds). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965
- ZH** Hamann, Johann. *Briefwechsel*. 6 vols. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (eds). Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955–1975

Notes

- 1 The text likely postdates the Talmudic passage that appears to mention it, though it is concerned with the same subject. See: Weiss, 2018.
- 2 The notable exception being three colloquia in the early nineties; Kassel 1991, Jerusalem 1992 and Berlin 1995. The subsequently published lectures have been indispensable in the research of this chapter. See: Goodman-Thau (1999, vii).
- 3 Though three spellings of Kabbalah, Cabala and Qabbalah are typically used to designate the distinct Jewish, Christian, and Hermetic approaches to the tradition respectively, in this chapter, I prefer “Kabbalah” as such distinctions are often not clear in the marginal cases I am examining.
- 4 “Jewish history has always been for me the only universal history, just as the people themselves are a model of Christianity as well as a sign of the human race”. See: ZH.IV, 145.
- 5 While Kilcher stops here, it is clear that the techniques date back to the very earliest emergence of the Kabbalah such as in the Hasidei Ashkenaz movement with Eleazar of Worm’s *Sefer haShem*.
- 6 For a much more thorough account of the Romantic attitudes to reaching the infinite through the aesthetic see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988.

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7 Schelling, Hegel, and Esotericism

Glenn Alexander Magee

Introduction

This chapter argues that F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) were actively interested in esotericism, and that this interest shaped their philosophies. I understand “esotericism” to comprise what is often referred to as “the occult”: that is, magic and “the supernatural” generally, including “the paranormal” (extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, spiritualism, etc.).¹ I also construe “esotericism” broadly to include Christian theosophy and Kabbalah, which are also commonly categorized as “mysticism.” I believe, in fact, that the philosophies of Schelling and Hegel are a development of the Christian theosophical tradition inaugurated by Jacob Boehme. Indeed, I think that both Schelling and Hegel might have endorsed this claim.²

A plausible argument can be made that Schelling and Hegel themselves did not distinguish sharply between philosophy and esotericism. When Hegel delivered his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* in Jena in 1804–1805, he identified Boehme as “the first German philosopher” and stated that “the content of his philosophizing is genuinely German [*echt deutsch*]” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 20, 94). Hegel refers to Boehme both as “philosophus teutonicus” and as “theosophus teutonicus,” and states that “we” (namely, “we Germans”) have no reason to be ashamed of him (Hegel 1986, Vol. 20, 91).

Some years later, in lecture comments on *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 1817), Hegel states that “It should also be mentioned here that the meaning of the speculative is to be understood as being the same as what used in earlier times to be called ‘the mystical,’ especially with regard to the religious consciousness and its content” (Hegel 1986 Vol. 8, 178; Hegel 1991, 133).³ This is a striking claim, since “speculation” (*Spekulation*, *spekulative Philosophie*) is the term Hegel uses to describe his own philosophy. Mysticism is speculation, Hegel argues, because it involves a form

of thinking which is dialectical: it puts the understanding (*Verstand*) into perplexity by revealing the ways in which opposites involve one another, even to the point of revealing underlying identities. In other words, mysticism asserts the “coincidence of opposites” – and so, in effect, does Hegelian dialectic (Hegel 1986, Vol. 8, 179; Hegel 1991, 133). As we shall see, Schelling’s attitude towards mysticism is, if anything, even more positive, and much more openly acknowledged.

Philosophy is the “love of wisdom,” and it is clear from both men’s work that they believed in multiple sources of wisdom independent of philosophy; sources that philosophy could draw upon in pursuing its quest. For example, contrary to much of the modern philosophical tradition, both Schelling and Hegel regarded religion as an autonomous source of truth. And not just this: they saw philosophy as *depending upon* religion, in that certain truths are revealed through religion prior to philosophy ever getting to work. For instance, Hegel writes that, “it is the distinctive task of philosophy to transmute the *content* that is in the representation of religion into the *form* of thought; the content [itself] cannot be distinguished” (Hegel 1984c, 235; Hegel 1984b, 333; italics in original). Hegel refers to religions as “sprouting up fortuitously, like the flowers and creations of nature, as foreshadowings, images, representations, without [our] knowing where they come from or where they are going to” (Hegel 1984c, 106; Hegel 1984b, 196). “Religion,” he writes in the same text, “is a begetter of the divine spirit, not an invention of human beings but an effect of the divine at work, of the divine productive process within humanity” (Hegel 1984c, 46; Hegel 1984b, 130). Hegel’s views in these passages echo Schelling’s. Further, the same attitude is taken by both men toward art – and, I would suggest, to mysticism and esotericism as well.

H.S. Harris, writing in his classic intellectual biography *Hegel’s Development*, refers to Hegel’s “evident desire to show that the older alchemical tradition of Paracelsus (and probably Boehme himself) contained symbolic expressions of important speculative truths” (Harris 1983, 399). To give one such example, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel discusses Paracelsus’s three “elements” of sulphur, mercury and salt, mentioning that Boehme referred to these as “the great triad.” Hegel comments that such ideas are easy to refute if taken literally, however “it should not be overlooked ... that in their essence they contain and express the determinations of the Concept [*Begriff*]” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 9, 221–222; Hegel 1970, 178–179). This is an extraordinary remark, for here Hegel is saying that if the alchemical language of Paracelsus and Boehme is considered in a non-literal way, its inner meaning is essentially identical to his *Logic* (i.e., to the “determinations of the Concept”).

Both while Schelling and Hegel were alive, and in the years following their deaths, it was common for them to be linked with mysticism and

esotericism. In 1845, Franz Pfeiffer (1815–1868), the Swiss literary scholar who first published Meister Eckhart's sermons, wrote that "the German mystics are the patriarchs of German speculation. They represent ... the principles upon which systems well-known five centuries later were based, not only in their beginnings, but in part already in their totality" (quoted in Benz 1983, 2). By "systems" he is referring to the systematic philosophies of Schelling and Hegel. Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–1887) remarked that the Hegelian philosophy had come forth "from the school of the old mystics, especially Jacob Boehme" (quoted in Benz 1983, 2). And in his 1835 work *Die christliche Gnosis*, Ferdinand Christian Bauer claimed that Hegel is a modern Gnostic and linked him with Boehme.

Robert Schneider, in his groundbreaking 1937 study *Schellings und Hegels Schwäbische Geistesahnen (Schelling's and Hegel's Spiritual Ancestors)*, argues that both men inhabited a completely different "conceptual world" (*Begriffswelt*) from that of Enlightenment rationalism and mechanism. Their world, Schneider writes, was that of the "ancient categories of chemical (i.e., alchemical)-biological philosophy of nature" stemming from "Oetinger, Boehme, van Helmont, Boyle, Fludd, Paracelsus, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Telesio, and others ... This philosophy of nature was still alive in Württemberg during Hegel and Schelling's youth" (Schneider 1937, 20). More recent scholarship on Schelling, Hegel, and esotericism includes Ernst Benz's indispensable *Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy* (1983). See also Brown (1977), Horn (1997), Magee (2008), O'Regan (1994), Voegelin (1990), and Walsh (1978).

In what follows, I will confine myself to three major areas concerning Schelling's and Hegel's relationship to esotericism: (1) the influence of Jacob Boehme and Christian theosophy; (2) the influence of Swabian "speculative pietism" and Jewish and Christian Kabbalah; and (3) the investigations of both thinkers into animal magnetism and the paranormal.

Jacob Boehme and Christian Theosophy

In 1798, Schelling was called to the University of Jena as an extraordinary (i.e., unpaid) professor. He was only 23 but was already regarded as a rising star. Many of the leading lights of the German Romantic movement lived in Jena at this time, including F. Schlegel, A.W. Schlegel, Novalis, and Ludwig Tieck. David Walsh writes that "within that company an intense centre of interest was formed by their rediscovery of the German mystical tradition. For the first time the works of the great medieval and Reformation mystics were becoming widely available within their native land" (Walsh 1984, 22–23).

No mystic was more important to these men than Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a shoemaker in Goerlitz, in Lusatia on the borders of Bohemia. In

1600, he had a mystical vision in which, for about 15 minutes, he felt able to intuit the essences or “signatures” of all things. Boehme wrote nothing for years, then produced *Aurora oder Morgenröthe im Aufgang* (*Aurora or Dawn Ascending*) in 1612, his first attempt to explain the revelation he had received years earlier. *Aurora* is a work of theosophy: an attempt to obtain wisdom about God, or (some would say) God’s own wisdom. There followed many other works in which Boehme expounded his ideas in an increasingly sophisticated and elaborate manner.

Boehme rejects the traditional understanding of a God existing whole and complete apart from creation and conceives him instead as an evolving being. Boehme believes that God develops or realizes himself through creation, and he creates out of a desire to confront himself or to achieve self-awareness. Considered apart from creation, God is “not yet” God. In one of his later works, Boehme wrote “no thing can be revealed to itself without opposition” (Boehme 1955–1961, 166). In other words, for God to become the truly realized God he must oppose an “other” to himself, through which he comes to be. This process of God expressing himself in creation and achieving self-revelation reaches completion with man.

It is probable that Ludwig Tieck introduced Schelling, Novalis, and the Schlegel brothers to Boehme’s writings in 1799, and it has been conjectured that Boehme was being read aloud at meetings of the Jena Romantics’ circle during this period (see Mayer 1999, 182). Friedrich Schlegel soon fell under Boehme’s spell, calling his work “the greatest, most profound, most individual, most admirable work of idealism” (quoted in Mayer 1999, 140). Writing years later, Tieck recalled that he found Schelling particularly open to Boehme’s ideas (Zeydel 1935, 130). Indeed, over the course of several years Schelling began trying to acquire Boehme’s writings for his library, finally obtaining a complete collection only in 1804. It is possible, however, that Schelling may have encountered Boehme’s ideas before 1799, through the works of the Swabian “speculative pietist” Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, whom we will discuss in the next section. Among Schelling scholars, there is some controversy as to how early the influence of Boehme becomes apparent in his works. However, the influence on Schelling’s “later philosophy” (produced after he left Jena in 1803) is absolutely unmistakable, and we shall discuss those works later in this section, and in the following two sections.

As for Hegel, he came to Jena after a dispiriting time as a household tutor in Berne and Frankfurt. Nevertheless, Hegel’s biographer Karl Rosenkranz has argued (controversially) that this period was a “theosophical phase” in Hegel’s Development, during which the philosopher studied the works of several German mystics (Rosenkranz 1844, 157). Hegel moved to Jena in January 1801, after Schelling secured for him a position there. In Jena, as we have seen, Boehme was all the rage in prominent intellectual

circles, and Hegel's best friend was one of the leading Boehme enthusiasts. Furthermore, in the beginning Hegel was essentially Schelling's follower, and both his intellectual and personal debts to Schelling were very considerable. It is therefore likely that Hegel would have been predisposed to take Boehme quite seriously.

In Jena, during the period 1803 to 1806, Hegel composed several versions of a new "system of philosophy," culminating in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807). His lectures and personal notes from this time show a very strong interest in Boehme. Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* includes an entire chapter on him, running to some 30 pages in most modern editions. This is the only material Hegel wrote on the theosopher that has come down to us in its entirety. I would argue that Hegel's flirtation with Jacob Boehme played a significant role in this formative period of his philosophical career. The evidence for this is to be found in the chapter on Boehme in the posthumously published *Lectures*, and in the fragmentary manuscripts Hegel also produced during this period.

It is obvious from the *Lectures* that Hegel made a careful study of Boehme.⁴ Hegel quotes from or cites several of his works. The main source is *Aurora*, but Hegel also relies upon *The Three Principles of the Divine Essence*, *Mysterium Magnum*, and other texts. Hegel continually compliments Boehme on his profundity – while simultaneously criticizing him for the "barbarity" (*Barbarei*) of his mode of expression. This is due to Boehme's strong tendency to engage in what Hegel calls *Vorstellung*, "representation" or "picture-thinking": the practice of thinking in terms of images, rather than abstract concepts.

Following some introductory remarks, Hegel offers a brief biographical sketch of Boehme, including a vivid account of his mystical visions. Hegel's treatment of these is devoid of sarcasm and scepticism. This is in keeping with his open-mindedness – exemplified by passages in the later *Encyclopedia* (discussed in section four below) – toward paranormal phenomena in general. Hegel speculates that Boehme must have read "mystical, theosophical, and alchemical writings," including those of Paracelsus (Hegel 1986, Vol. 20, 94; Hegel 1892, Vol. 3, 191). He begins his account of Boehme's ideas by saying that "Boehme's profoundest interest is in the Idea [*Idee*], and he struggles hard to express it" (Hegel 1986, Vol. 20, 95; Hegel 1892, Vol. 3, 193). In Hegel's philosophy "the Idea" is the final major division of the *Logic*. In it, subject and object are overcome, so that Idea is ultimately idea of itself (or Absolute Idea, the final individual category of the *Logic*). However, this self-related Idea becomes truly actual only in self-related *thought*, that is, in human self-consciousness.

Hegel devotes a good deal of attention to Boehme's insistence that negativity and, in a sense, evil are inherent in creation *and* in God. In Hegel,

negativity is sublated (*aufgehoben*) within “the whole” or “Absolute,” which he equates with God. Negativity is endemic to the dialectic through which the whole develops itself – transmuting the negative into the positive, into an essential part of the whole. Hegel sees the same basic thought-pattern at work in Boehme. He views Boehme as groping towards a conception of God that draws unity out of opposition, finding even the Devil within God.

Hegel writes:

The fundamental idea in Boehme is the effort to comprise everything in an absolute unity – the absolute divine unity and the union of all opposites in God. Boehme’s chief, and one may say, his only thought, is the divine threefoldness; to perceive all things as the revelation and representation of the Holy Trinity, so that it is the universal principle in which and through which everything exists; in such a way, moreover, that all things have only this Trinity in themselves, not as a Trinity of the ordinary conception [*Vorstellung*], but rather as the actual [trinity of] the Absolute Idea.

(Hegel 1986, Vol. 20, 98; Hegel 1892, Vol. 3, 196)

Hegel is here noting the similarity between the trinitarian structure of Boehme’s thought and his own. Hegel claims, however, that Boehme’s particular use of the Trinity is an instance of his picture-thinking. For Boehme, as Hegel tells it, God the Father represents an unactualized *will* to self-consciousness. The Son is a necessary complement to the Father because, as Hegel states, “God as the simple, absolute essence is not the absolute God” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 3, 105; Hegel 1892, Vol. 3, 202). Whereas God the Father is “source and germ” (*Quellen und Keimen*) of all powers and qualities, the Son is their unfolding. Compare this to what Hegel has to say in the *Encyclopedia* when he discusses the relation between God, as Absolute Idea, and nature: “God, as an abstraction, is not the true God, but only as the living process of positing his other, the world, which, comprehended in its divine form is his Son; and it is only in unity with his other, in Spirit, that God is subject” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 9, 23; Hegel 1970, 13).

Hegel mentions that Boehme also refers to the Son as Lucifer, and identifies him as “the Separator” (*der Separator*) who takes the powers unified within God the Father and “separates” them so that God confronts himself. However, for Boehme, God’s self-revelation is not complete until his powers are expressed in the Spirit, which is the unity of the light (the Son or Lucifer) with the powers inherent in the Father. Spirit is the creation of an independent universe as a constant manifestation of God’s powers. For Boehme, the Trinity is continually born in all things, so that all of creation is the revelation of God. Hegel concludes his remarks on Boehme by yet

again commenting on the “barbarism” of his form of expression. But he also insists on the profundity of Boehme’s ideas, saying that “we cannot fail to see the profound craving for speculation which existed in this man” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 20, 119; Hegel 1892, Vol. 3, 216).

Surprisingly, what we find when we turn to Hegel’s posthumously published Jena fragments and notes is the philosopher freely drawing on *both* the ideas and the vocabulary of Boehme. It is clear that, despite his reservations, Hegel was strangely attracted to Boehme’s mode of expression. One of these texts is a “myth” about Lucifer, in which Hegel writes:

God, having turned toward nature and expressed himself in the pomp and dull repetition of its forms, became aware of his expansion [...] and became angry over it. Wrath [*Zorn*, a term we find in Boehme] is this formation, this contraction into an empty point. He finds himself in this way, with his being poured out into the unending, restless infinity, where there is no present but an empty transcendence of limit, which always remains even as it is transcended.

(Hoffmeister 1936, 364–365)

In Hegel’s “myth,” God expresses himself in nature, but becomes “angry” over it and through this becomes self-aware. God’s wrath becomes the spirit of Lucifer, which reflects God back to himself. Hegel critiques his own myth as “the intuitions of barbarians” (*Die Anschauungen der Barbarei*) because of its reliance on picture-thinking. However, the language and spirit of this fragment are also present in the “Revealed Religion” chapter of the *Phenomenology*. Walsh states accurately that this section is “from start to finish identical with the theosophic Christianity of Boehme” (Walsh 1984, 28). There, Hegel writes of the “first-born Son of Light” (Lucifer), “who fell because he withdrew into himself or became self-centred, but that in his place another was at once created” (Hegel 1988, 505; Hegel 1977, 468).

In the same period, Hegel also produced a work that has come to be called the “divine triangle fragment.” The manuscript has been lost, but Hegel’s early biographer Karl Rosenkranz quotes from it and gives a detailed description. Rosenkranz maintains that the text, which is extremely obscure, was heavily influenced by Boehme (and Franz von Baader) and he describes it as involving a “triangle of triangles” (Rosenkranz 1844, 160; Harris 1983, 185).⁵ Hegel’s first triangle (“God the Father”) depicts a “Godhead” closed inside itself, much like Boehme’s primal trinity of conflict within God, preceding his manifestation. In “God the Son,” the second triangle, God confronts himself in an otherness that has to be brought into union with God, or it may become evil. Hegel states that “the Son must ... overcome evil, ... must awaken the other, the self-cognition of God”

(Rosenkranz, 163; Harris, 187–188). Thereupon a third triangle, that of the Holy Spirit, comes into being. Hegel writes that “the self-consciousness of God is now the Spirit, yet it is also the eternal Son whom God intuits as himself. Thus has the holy triangle of triangles closed itself. The first [triangle] is the Idea of God which is carried out in the other triangles, and returns into itself by passing through them” (Rosenkranz 1844, 162–163; Harris 1983, 187).

In these texts, Hegel is employing the language and style of Boehme to develop the outlines of his philosophical system. Hegel’s first triangle – “God the Father,” a Godhead closed inside itself – is analogous to the later *Logic*, which is “God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite Spirit” (Hegel 1992, 33–34; Hegel 1969, 50). The relationship of the first triangle to the second – the Son or earth – is strikingly similar to the relationship between Hegel’s *Logic* and nature: it is the *telos* of Idea to become embodied as the natural world. In the third triangle, God intuits the Son, or earth, as himself, and achieves self-consciousness, a moment which approximates the role played by Spirit in Hegel’s mature system. Human *Geist* brings the system, and reality itself, to completion when it recognizes that it itself is the embodiment of Idea, and that all of nature (and history) is intelligible as its progressive manifestation. During roughly the same period in which he wrote the triangle fragment, Hegel altered his philosophical system from four divisions to the familiar triad of *Logic – Philosophy of Nature – Philosophy of Spirit*, the same triad seemingly depicted in Boehme’s style in the triangle fragment. I would suggest the possibility that Boehme’s idiosyncratic interpretation of the Trinity helped Hegel to see specifically *how* his own system could be expressed in tripartite form.⁶

Hegel’s interest in Boehme was well-known to friends and acquaintances. In 1811, one of his former Jena students, Peter Gabriel van Ghert (1782–1852), sent him Boehme’s collected works as a gift. Hegel thanked van Ghert in a letter of 29 July 1811 saying that “[Boehme’s] theosophy will always be one of the most remarkable attempts of a penetrating yet uncultivated man to comprehend the innermost essential nature of the absolute being” (Hoffmeister 1952–1981, Letter #192; Hegel 1984a, 573). Hegel never wrote extensively on Boehme again, but in addition to the 1811 exchange with van Ghert there is reason to believe that he remained interested in Boehme and never changed his evaluation of him.

For example, in the Preface to the 1827 edition of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel briefly discusses Boehme’s importance, referring to him as “this mighty spirit” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 8, 28–29; Hegel 1991, 15). This was the first time Hegel had mentioned Boehme by name in a published work. In the same text Hegel also makes several admiring references to Franz von Baader, with whom he had established a friendship. Baader (1765–1841)

was one of Boehme's principal interpreters, often referred to as "Boehmius redivivus." Hegel mentions Boehme again in his revision of the first book of the *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik*), completed not long before his death. In the original 1812 edition Hegel employs the terms *Qualierung* and *Inqualierung* but does not mention that he derives them from Boehme. In the revised edition, the passage in question has been altered to explicitly credit Boehme (Hegel 1992, 109; Hegel 1969, 114).

Returning now to Schelling, we must discuss the influence of Boehme on his later works, produced after he left Jena in 1803. By far the most important of these is the long essay *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Related Matters* (*Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, 1809), referred to by scholars simply as the *Freiheitsschrift*. Significantly, this was the last major work Schelling published during his lifetime – though he left behind a considerable *Nachlass*, some of which also bears the impress of the shoemaker of Goerlitz. The influence of Boehme on the *Freiheitsschrift* is so extensive and so obvious that it is beyond dispute. At times, Schelling's position is virtually indistinguishable from Boehme's. Here I can only offer the briefest of summaries of this profound text, which Martin Heidegger called "the acme of the metaphysics of German idealism" (Heidegger 1985, 165).

The *Freiheitsschrift* is ostensibly concerned with how human freedom is possible if the universe is conceived as a whole of causally interdependent parts. Like Hegel, Schelling takes this whole to be God. All things are, therefore, within God, and Schelling will argue that human freedom is possible only because it has its basis in God. To show how this can be the case, Schelling makes a fundamental distinction between ground (*Grund*) and existence (*Existenz*). Existence is here understood as ex-istence, as "outward standing," as the emergence of being from a prior ground.⁷ Schelling insists that all things must be understood in terms of this duality, including God himself. Of necessity, however, the *ground* of a thing's existence is distinct from the thing itself. If we apply this reasoning to God, while bearing in mind that nothing exists outside God, we are forced to the conclusion that God's ground is *not* God, yet must exist *within* him.

As Robert Brown has observed, this notion of a ground existing within God, yet distinct from him, comes straight from Boehme (Brown 1977, 264). Boehme refers to a "dark centre" or "dark nature" within God, and states that in the dark nature "he is not called God" (Boehme 2007, 31). Schelling repeatedly employs this same language of "darkness" (*Dunkelheit*) in writing of the ground of God, which he identifies with a primal will to self-revelation, to give birth to itself. "In the final and highest judgment," Schelling writes, "there is no being other than will. Willing is primal being [*Urseyn*]" (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 7, 350: Schelling

2006, 21). This too is inspired by Boehme, who, in the words of one commentator, conceives his ground within God as a “dark inchoate will for self-revelation” (Walsh 1992, 154). According to Schelling, further, in order for this will to achieve its aim and result in *actual* revelation, it must call forth its opposite: the “will of the understanding” or “will of existence.” The will of the ground, though it is a will to self-revelation, remains dark and unformed, while the will of existence opposes this as light does darkness. All that ex-ists stands forth into manifestation (“existence” or “understanding”) from out of a prior darkness or absence. Both God and nature are born in the dialectical struggle between these two wills.

Schelling argues that human freedom consists fundamentally in the capacity to choose good or evil, and that this involves an identification with either the will of understanding/existence or the will of the ground. Insofar as man possesses this capacity for freedom, he is like God and mirrors God back to himself. In God, however, the two wills are indissoluble, whereas in man they can be separated. To identify with the will of understanding means to embrace the whole and one’s place in it. To identify with the will of the ground, however, is to choose *self-will*, the root of all evil. Effectively, this involves setting oneself against the whole; behaving as if one were the whole or Absolute itself, with all else existing to serve one’s ends.

Here, Schelling parts company with the entire philosophical tradition from Plato to Leibniz, in which evil is usually interpreted as a “privation”; as a mere lack or absence (of proper form or virtue) rather than anything real in itself. For Schelling, evil is rather a kind of force or power existing in the world, born through the self-will of creatures (though no creature is capable of the kind of exquisite evil that can be conjured by man). However, Schelling does have one predecessor in this: Jacob Boehme.⁸ Schelling does not credit Boehme with this theory, just as he does not refer to Boehme at any point in the *Freiheitsschrift*. He does, however, cite Boehme’s interpreter, Franz von Baader, attributing to him the “only correct” concept of evil, according to which it is a “positive perversion” (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 7, 366; Schelling 2006, 35). (And he refers to Baader several other times in the text.)

The *Freiheitsschrift* also refers to a concept of a primal “indifference” [*Indifferenz*] beyond the distinction between ground and existence, and from which these emerge. Schelling calls this *Ungrund* (unground, or not-ground), a term which was coined by Boehme and which is exclusively associated with his theosophy. Schelling introduces this concept late in the text, stating that “there must be a being *before* all ground and before all that exists, thus generally before any duality – how can we call it anything other than the original ground or the *Ungrund*?” (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 7, 407; Schelling 2006, 68).

There is also an influence of Boehme on Schelling's posthumously published *Stuttgart Lectures* (1810) and *The Ages of the World* (1811–1815), to which we will turn in the next section. Like Hegel, Schelling only mentions Boehme by name late in his career. One of his most significant statements about the theosopher occurs in the *Philosophy of Revelation* (*Philosophie der Offenbarung*, 1841–1842):

One cannot avoid saying of Boehme that he is a miracle in the history of humanity and especially in the history of the German mind. If one could ever forget what a treasure of natural profundity of mind and heart is to be found in the German nation, one would only have to remind oneself of Boehme. ... As the mythologies and theogonies of primitive peoples anticipated science, so Boehme anticipated all scientific systems of modern philosophy in his description of the birth of God.

(Schelling, 1856–1861, Vol. 13, 123)⁹

Speculative Pietism and Christian Kabbalah

Such scholars as Ernst Benz and Robert Schneider have argued that it is only in terms of the intellectual traditions of old Württemberg that we can truly understand Schelling and Hegel.¹⁰ These traditions included a robust interest in matters mystical, theosophic, and esoteric. Schneider's *Schellings und Hegels Schwäbische Geistesahnen* was the first major study of the influence of these currents of thought on the two idealists. Schneider argues that Schelling and Hegel were influenced by such aspects of Swabian cultural life as mystical pantheism, Paracelsism, and theosophical *Naturphilosophie* – especially that of the Boehmean F.C. Oetinger, whom we will discuss in a moment. And Walsh writes that “the influence of the Enlightenment, to the extent it had made itself felt in Württemberg, was integrated with a theosophic philosophy of nature and a speculative pietism which was concerned with the progressive revelation of the divine structure of history” (Walsh 1978, 296). The influence of these aspects of Swabian intellectual culture on Schelling and Hegel remains controversial.

The two major figures in the tradition of Swabian “speculative pietism” are Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782). Through the latter, a strong strain of Behmenism and Christian Kabbalah infuses itself into Swabian pietism. Schneider has described Bengel as “the philosopher of history who anticipated the work of Schelling and Hegel” (Schneider 1937, 38). Bengel was a Lutheran clergyman and Greek-language scholar known for his millenarianism and for his commentaries on the New Testament. Bengel argued that history is the unfolding of the divine being in time. Ernst Benz writes, “in Bengel, it is

God who becomes real in the history of mankind, step by step, according to a precise providential plan to build his Kingdom. This plan will be effectively completed at the end of history under Christ's command in the Kingdom of a Thousand Years" (Benz 1983, 39). Via an esoteric interpretation of the Book of Revelation, Bengel predicted that this would occur in the year 1836.

As to F.C. Oetinger, Wouter J. Hanegraaff has written that he is "the foremost representative of Christian theosophy in the eighteenth century" – referring specifically to the substantial influence on him of Boehme (Hanegraaff 2007, 67). Hanegraaff writes, further, that

throughout his later life, Oetinger would defend and develop a Böhmean-kabbalistic theosophy, integrated with a biblical literalism in the Pietist tradition of Johann Albrecht Bengel ... opposing it against the hated rationalism and philosophical idealism of Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff.

(Hanegraaff 2007, 67)

Following a brief account of Oetinger's ideas, I will discuss the influence of kabbalism upon them. This influence was in part mediated to Oetinger by Boehme, who was almost certainly influenced by Kabbalah. In discussing this matter, we will introduce an important new aspect to Schelling's and Hegel's relationship to esotericism: the influence of medieval Jewish kabbalism, as adapted by Christian speculation (the so-called "Christian Kabbalah").

After a conversion experience in 1721, Oetinger entered the theological seminary in Tübingen, where Schelling and Hegel would study decades later. After expressing his frustrations with the Wolffian philosophy of rationalism and mechanism taught at the *Stift*, a friend recommended that he read the works of Boehme. It was not long before Oetinger became an enthusiastic convert. Boehme's claim that spirit cannot truly exist without embodiment is crucial for Oetinger's thought. Oetinger writes: "Embodiment is the end of God's work" (*Leiblichkeit ist das Ende der Werke Gottes*) (Oetinger 1837, 360).¹¹ He holds that God comes to more and more adequate expression through a spiritual corporealization – what he calls *Geistleiblichkeit*. All of nature and history exhibit the process of God's progressive embodiment, which is simultaneously the process by which God achieves self-consciousness. Oetinger holds that "God is an eternal desire for self-revelation" (*eine ewige Begierde sich zu offenbaren*) (Oetinger 1969, 536).

He writes that "the ancients [*die Alten*] saw God as an eternal process in which he emerges from himself and returns to himself; this is the true conception of God and of his glory; it is the true conception of his infinite

life and power which issues in the Blessed Trinity” (quoted in Hanratty 1986–1987, 314). Whereas Bengel had stressed how we can know that the Millennium is approaching, Oetinger accepted Bengel’s prognostications and focused instead on what the end of history would bring. Oetinger believed that not only would all men live in perfect harmony, but science would be transformed. *Zentralerkenntnis* (“central knowledge”), Oetinger’s version of *pansophia*, would unify the sciences through a vision of the oneness of all things in the divine being.

I turn now, very briefly, to the complex issue of the influence of kabbalism on Oetinger. We know that Oetinger read Knorr von Rosenroth’s compendium of Jewish kabbalist texts in Latin translation, *Kabbala denudata* (1677, 1684). He is also known to have been friendly with Koppel Hecht, a kabbalist living in Frankfurt. When Oetinger asked Hecht how he might better understand Kabbalah, Hecht recommended he read the works of Boehme. Most Boehme scholars are convinced that he was influenced by Kabbalah, though none has ever demonstrated exactly how he became conversant with it. If Boehme was influenced by kabbalism then the influence of kabbalism on Oetinger was both direct and indirect. And we are faced with the interesting prospect of a double-barrelled indirect influence on Schelling and Hegel, via both Boehme and Oetinger.

There is one particular school of kabbalism that seems to have been of supreme importance for both Boehme and Oetinger. One of Oetinger’s most important works, *Öffentliches Denckmal der Lehrtafel* (1763), was a commentary on a kabbalistic painting hanging in a small church at Bad Teinach-Zavelstein in the Black Forest. Oetinger’s account of Kabbalah in this text is heavily indebted to the ideas of Isaac Luria (1534–1572), which were enormously influential beyond the confines of Judaism. Luria’s “new Kabbalah” argues that if God is truly infinite there would be no room for creation (seemingly implying that God is an infinite body). Therefore, given that creation does indeed exist, it must have come about through God’s *self-limitation* of his infinitude, which Luria calls *tsimtsum* (“contraction”). God, the infinite, contracts himself, opening a space within himself in which creation, the finite, comes to be. In essence, this is strikingly like Hegel’s view of the infinite and finite: the “true infinite” (*wahrhafte Unendlichkeit*) contains the finite within itself. We may note also that this theory is a classic example of “pantheism,” a term – literally meaning “all-in-God-ism” – first used by Karl Krause (1781–1832) to differentiate Schelling’s and Hegel’s theology from the pantheism of Spinoza. Hanegraaff describes Oetinger’s Luria-influenced philosophy of nature as “thoroughly pantheist” (Hanegraaff 2007, 75).

Echoing the Lurianic *tsimtsum*, Oetinger writes that “God is in himself without space, but in the revelation of his hiddenness, he is himself the space of all things” (quoted in Schneider 1937, 100). Luria’s account

of *tsimtsum* is highly original because he is denying that the world comes to be through God's revelation or emanation, a view commonly held by earlier kabbalists. Rather, it is precisely through God's withdrawal and concealment that the universe is born. According to Luria, further, the process by which God subsequently creates the world involves him injecting the divine light into the space within himself. The light differentiates itself into the ten classical kabbalistic *Sephiroth* (divine hypostases or aspects) which stream into ten "vessels." The vessels, however, prove incapable of holding the light and shatter. The broken pieces of these vessels constitute the inherently imperfect matter from which the world is made.

The *telos* of this imperfect world, however, is to be made whole again; to be perfected and raised back up to the divine light. This would complete the cosmic process begun literally within God, by transforming the finite within the infinite into an authentic image of the infinite. Luria calls this idea *tikkun*, a cosmic restoration that is effected by human beings. Gershom Scholem writes that Luria believed that "the process in which God conceives, brings forth and develops Himself does not reach its final conclusion in God. Certain parts of the process of restitution are allotted to man" (Scholem 1946, 273). The supreme task of men on earth is to morally perfect themselves, and thereby raise the fallen world up to its initial state of being in the light projected by God.¹² The correspondences between Boehme's ideas and Luria's are so striking it is highly likely that his kabbalistic sources were Lurianic – though I cannot make the case for that here.

I turn now to the influence of these currents of thought on Schelling, whose connections to Swabian speculative pietism are better documented than Hegel's. We know, for instance, that Schelling's father owned Oetinger's works (Schneider 1937, 8). Schelling's father, grandfather, uncle, and great uncle all had close ties to the Bengel-Oetinger circle (Magee 2008, 80). In October 1784, Schelling's father called on Philipp Matthaeus Hahn (1739–1790) – one of Oetinger's most influential followers – with his wife and young Friedrich. Hahn recorded this meeting in his diary, and Schelling's first publication was a poem he wrote commemorating Hahn's death. As we have discussed, Schelling's interest in Boehme is well-documented, but he is known to have told one of his Jena students that Oetinger was "clearer than Boehme" (Mayer 1999, 185). Writing to his father on September 7, 1806, Schelling reports that Franz von Baader had asked if he could obtain for him Oetinger's writings. Schelling subsequently communicated Baader's request to his friend Christian Pregizer, an Oetingerite. Pregizer later claimed that when he first met Schelling in 1803 they spent most of their time together talking about Boehme and Oetinger (Benz 1983, 13–14).

Benz writes that Schelling's "principal ideas are dependent upon the terminology of Bengel and Oetinger in such a direct and visible way it is impossible to ignore these fundamental sources of his thought" (Benz 1983, 30). In his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (*System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, 1801), one can discern the influence of Bengel and Oetinger when, near the end of the text, he writes, "history as a whole is a progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the Absolute. ... Man, through his history, provides a continuous demonstration of God's presence, a demonstration, however, which only the whole of history can render complete" (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 3, 603–604; Schelling 1980, 211). In a later work, he describes history as a "successively developing revelation of God" (Schelling 1927, 47). Hegel would follow Schelling in making similar claims in his own philosophy of history.

In *The Ages of the World* (*Die Weltalter*)¹³ Schelling writes:

That everything would, as much as is possible, become figural and be brought into visible, corporeal form is the final intention. As the ancients expressed it, embodiment [*Leiblichkeit*] is the end of the ways of God (*finis viarum Dei*), who wants to reveal himself spatially, or in a place, as well as temporally.

(Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 8, 325; Schelling 2000, 93)¹⁴

Readers will doubtless recognize that this is virtually a quotation from Oetinger, who writes, as we have already seen, "embodiment [*Leiblichkeit*] is the end of God's work." For Schelling – as for Boehme and Oetinger – the Absolute must express itself in concrete form or remain abstract and inchoate. We find exactly the same pattern in Hegel's system, in which *Logic* necessarily gives way to *Philosophy of Nature* and *Philosophy of Spirit*. Incidentally, *Die Weltalter* was also the title of a well-known work by Bengel, published in 1746.

Schelling's 1810 *Stuttgart Lectures* (*Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*) also display evidence of the influence of Oetinger's Lurianic Christian Kabbalah. For example, in language that must inevitably call to mind the *tsimtsum*, Schelling writes: "[W]hen God restricts himself to the first power, this especially ought to be called contraction [*Contraction*]. Contraction, then, marks the beginning of all reality. For this reason, it is the contracting rather than the expanding nature that possesses a primordial and grounding force" (Schelling 1856–1861, 429; Schelling 1994, 203).¹⁵ As in Luria, God contracts and thus opens a "space" within himself, in which creation comes to be. Thus, Schelling writes, further: "Only God himself can break with the absolute identity of his essence [through contraction] and thereby can create the space for a revelation" (Schelling 1856–1861, 429; Schelling 1994, 204). Of course, given the influence

of Luria on Boehme, one could equally well take the above as evidence of Boehme's influence on Schelling. Schneider has argued, however, that the more direct influence is Oetinger's, and I tend to agree (Schneider 1937, 10).

In the *Stuttgart Lectures*, Schelling once more puts forward the Boehmean conception of a developing God. He writes: "*God creates himself* and, just as he creates himself, he is certainly not immediately present and complete either; For why otherwise create himself?" (Schelling 1856–1861, 432; Schelling 1994, 206; italics in original). Schelling then goes on to speak of two principles in us, an "unconscious, dark one" and a "conscious one," echoing the ideas of the *Freiheitsschrift*, published the previous year. Then he notes that "The same holds true for God. ... God contains the same two principles that we contain in ourselves" (Schelling 1856–1861, 433; Schelling 1994, 206–207).¹⁶

It is very difficult to imagine that Schelling was unaware of his debt to Oetinger. Benz has demonstrated that Schelling borrowed material from Oetinger's works, incorporating it into both his writings and lectures, but without attribution. For example, Schelling employed translations of biblical passages made by Oetinger, without crediting him (Benz 1983, 54–56). Benz notes that in these translations, Oetinger "introduces a theosophic interpretation different from Orthodox Lutheran theology" (Benz 1983, 54). Oetinger attempted to prove his claims about the reality of the "spirit body" (*Geistlichkeit*) through an actual experiment, which he mentions more than once in his writings. He claimed that if crushed balm-mint leaves are boiled their juice will form the pattern of the original leaves on the surface of the water. This was supposed to prove the existence of the spirit body or essence, which continues to exist after the dissolution of the material body (Benz 1983, 52–53). Oetinger used the term *Essentification* to describe the process by which a material body is "simplified" by being "reduced" to its essence or spirit body (Benz 1983, 52). Not only did Schelling appropriate the term *Essentification* from Oetinger, he also referred explicitly to the balm leaf experiment (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 14, 207).

We will return to some of these ideas in the following section when we deal with Schelling's views on survival after death. For now, however, we will turn to a consideration of the evidence for the influence of these same currents of thought on Hegel. First, I will very briefly consider the possible influence of Kabbalah – a subject I have discussed at greater length elsewhere.¹⁷ If there was such an influence on Hegel, it was most likely indirect: through Boehme and Oetinger. Another source was Johann Jacob Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, which appeared in five Latin volumes in 1742–1744. Hegel read these volumes carefully in preparing his 1805 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. One interesting feature

of Brucker is that he devotes considerable attention to mysticism and esotericism, towards which he was predominantly hostile. Volume 2 devotes more than 150 pages to kabbalism, and even includes diagrams of the kabbalistic “Tree of Life” and *sephiroth*.

In his *Lectures*, Hegel summarizes Brucker’s remarks on the Kabbalah in about two pages (under the section heading “Kabbalistische Philosophie”). Brucker’s account of Kabbalah is heavily Lurianic, and thus so is Hegel’s. For example, Hegel deals with kabbalist cosmogony as follows: “The emanation connected [with *Ein-Sof*, the infinite] is the effect of the first cause by the limitation of that first infinite whose boundary it is. In this one cause all is contained *eminenter*, not *formaliter* but *causaliter*” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 19, 427; Hegel 1892, Vol. 2, 396). This is obviously a description of Lurianic *tsimtsum*. Other such examples could be adduced.¹⁸ While Brucker cites Luria directly, Hegel never mentions him by name. Instead, Hegel cites one of Brucker’s Lurianic sources, Abraham Cohen de Herrera (sometimes Irija; c. 1570–c. 1635) and his work *Puerta del Cielo*. This was one of the texts published – in Latin translation – in Rosenroth’s aforementioned *Kabbala Denudata*, which was so well-known in Hegel’s time it is not improbable that he read it in preparing his remarks on Kabbalah.

So far as the influence of Oetinger goes, Hegel, like Schelling, never cites him directly. Matters are complicated by the fact that Hegel’s philosophy is heavily dependent upon Schelling’s, so the presence of “Oetingerite” elements in Hegel does not necessarily indicate any direct dependence of Hegel upon Oetinger. Further, much that is seemingly Oetingerite in Hegel is also conceivably attributable to his acquaintance with Boehme. However, there is a case to be made that Hegel refers to Oetinger indirectly, in the *Phenomenology*. As is well known, Hegel attacks Schelling in the Preface to that work, calling Schelling’s Absolute “the night in which all cows are black” (Hegel 1988, 13; Hegel 1977, 9). Hegel then offers us his own conception of the Absolute, saying that it must be conceived in “the whole wealth of [its] developed form. Only then is it conceived and expressed as an actuality” (Hegel 1988, 15; Hegel 1977, 11). This is followed by the oft-quoted remark, “The true is the whole” (*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*; Hegel 1988, 15; Hegel 1977, 11).

In one of his works, Oetinger writes: “The truth is a whole [*Die Wahrheit ist ein Ganzes*]; when one finally receives this total, synoptic vision of the truth, it matters not whether one begins by considering this part or that” (Oetinger 1858–1864, 45). He immediately follows these lines with a kabbalistic metaphor which essentially communicates the idea that the whole is immanent in each of the *Sephiroth*, or moments of God. This passage in Oetinger was well-known. Therefore, when Hegel announces in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* that “Das Wahre ist das Ganze,” my suggestion is that he knew that Schelling would understand the

allusion. When Hegel conceived the *Phenomenology*, Schelling still held to his conception of the Absolute as Indifference Point – which was essentially a modern recasting of the perennial mystical doctrine of the coincidence of opposites. The Absolute, in other words, is something that utterly transcends all distinctions. Just after writing “The true is the whole,” Hegel states: “But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development.” Hegel is exhorting Schelling to abandon the Indifference Point and to fully embrace the developmental conception of God to be found in the Christian kabbalist theological tradition exemplified by Boehme and Oetinger, and with which Hegel knew Schelling to be familiar. In the Preface, Hegel is, in effect, reminding Schelling of his – or, rather, *their* – roots.

Animal Magnetism and the Paranormal

Both Schelling and Hegel took a lifelong interest in matters that would today be termed “paranormal.” We will first consider their investigations into animal magnetism and psychic phenomena – dealing primarily with Hegel’s observations on the subject – and then turn to Schelling’s interest in Swedenborg and spiritualism.

Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) was a Swabian physician practicing medicine in Paris who discovered that passing magnets or magnetized materials over his patients sometimes put them into a trance. In time, Mesmer found that he could produce the same results simply by passing his hands over his patients. He theorized that these phenomena depended upon the presence of a fluid force which he called “animal magnetism” (*magnétisme animal*). In 1784, a French commission (headed by Benjamin Franklin) investigated Mesmer’s theories and declared them fraudulent. A subsequent Prussian investigation proved more favourable, and numerous sympathetic studies of Mesmer’s work appeared in Germany. Under the circumstances, therefore, Schelling’s and Hegel’s interest in animal magnetism is not as unusual as one might think.

In letters to Hegel from 1807, Schelling writes enthusiastically about experiments with animal magnetism, suggesting that Hegel perform the experiments himself, and that he consult an article by his brother Karl on the subject. Karl Eberhard Schelling (1783–1854) was a physician who attended some of Hegel’s classes in Jena in 1801–1802. In an 1810 letter to van Ghert (whom we encountered earlier, in connection with Hegel’s interest in Boehme), Hegel writes: “I was very interested to hear that you are occupying yourself with animal magnetism. To me this dark region of the organic conditions seems to merit great attention because, among other reasons, ordinary physiological opinions here vanish” (Hoffmeister 1952–1981, Letter #166; Hegel 1984a, 590).

This was written in response to a letter from van Ghert in which the latter asked Hegel to remind him of his theory of animal magnetism. Van Ghert published two works on animal magnetism in Dutch, which Hegel mentioned in his lectures.

It is, in fact, Hegel who has bequeathed to us the most extensive treatment of animal magnetism by any of the German idealists. This discussion occurs in the *Philosophy of Spirit* portion of the *Encyclopedia*, in a subdivision designated as the “Philosophy of Subjective Spirit.” Hegel’s views on animal magnetism are to be found both in the published text and in his lecture comments on it (the *Zusätze*, or “additions”) which have been incorporated into most modern editions of the *Encyclopedia*. M.J. Petry correctly states that Hegel’s treatment of animal magnetism, which runs to some 23 pages in the Wallace translation, is “the most extensive and detailed exposition of any one topic in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* and one of the most extensive expositions of the whole *Encyclopedia*” (Hegel 1978, Vol. 1, lviii).

Hegel’s remarks occur in a subsection of the “Subjective Spirit” text called “Feeling Soul” (*fühlende Seele*). Feeling soul is the dark, pre-conscious depth of the psyche. At this level, no real distinction has been made between the subjective and the objective. Hegel claims that feeling can actually take place without the mediation of the senses at all and “can, for example, perceive visible things without the aid of the eyes or without the mediation of light” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 140; Hegel 1971, 107). This is the reason for his discussing psychic phenomena within the material on “feeling soul.” When the individual is at the level of feeling soul, it is possible for another subject to exercise a “control function” over it, which Hegel calls its “genius” (*Genius*).

For example, early in life, when the child lives at the level of feeling soul, its mother may play the role of genius. However, it is also possible for adult individuals to temporarily “descend” to the level of feeling soul. In this state, another person may control them and become their genius. This idea is crucial for understanding Hegel’s treatment of animal magnetism. Hegel refers to such relationships, including that between mother and child, as exhibiting “a magic tie” and says that they may go so far as to exhibit “magnetic phenomena” (*magnetische Erscheinungen*; Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 126; Hegel 1971, 95). He explains his use of “magic” (*Magie*) as follows: “A magical power is one whose action is not determined by the interconnection, the conditions and mediations of objective relations; but such a power which produces effects without any mediation is ‘the feeling soul in its immediacy’” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 127–128; Hegel 1971, 97). (Hegel’s use of both “magic” and “magnetic phenomena” seems to refer to most of what we would call “paranormal” today.) Because a magical relationship apparently cancels the limitations of time and space, Hegel

states that magic is completely inexplicable to the ordinary understanding (*Verstand*) and can only be comprehended by speculative philosophy.

The discussion of “magic” that follows is wide-ranging. In addition to animal magnetism Hegel discusses clairvoyance, precognition, and even metal and water dowsing (a subject which keenly interested Schelling).¹⁹ Hegel is aware that fakery exists, but he seems to regard many of these phenomena as well-authenticated. His remarks on animal magnetism are so detailed that at times they read like a how-to manual. Hegel seems to speak from first-hand experience, and, indeed, there is a report that while in Heidelberg he attended mesmeric sittings with his friend Franz Josef Schelver, a botanist (Nicolin 1970, 157). He discusses at length miraculous cures produced by animal magnetism and states, “in modern times men of unimpeachable integrity have performed so many cures by magnetic treatment that anyone forming an unbiased judgment can no longer doubt the curative power of animal magnetism” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 159; Hegel 1971, 121). And he remarks, surprisingly, that “this subject is now so thoroughly understood that essentially new phenomena are no longer to be expected” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 154; Hegel 1971, 117). Hegel then offers his own, original theories about how animal magnetism operates. Put simply, he theorizes that in paranormal states the individual descends into a sub-mental state of identity with the feeling part of the soul (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 139; Hegel 1971, 106).²⁰ For the duration of a trance or clairvoyant state, feeling soul seizes control from the higher levels of *Geist*. In this state, commonsense distinctions of time and space and rigid distinctions between individuals are annulled, and such phenomena as clairvoyance and mind reading are possible.

Hegel also makes it very clear that he believes the ability of his philosophy to explain these phenomena is evidence of its truth. Hegel makes this claim in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Spirit* itself, indicating that he regards it as an important point. He states that it will prove impossible for us to understand animal magnetism “so long as we assume independent personalities, independent of one another and of the objective world which is their content – so long as we assume the absolute spatial and material externality of one part of being to another.” Therefore, the approach of speculative philosophy is shown to be necessary (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 138; Hegel 1971, 105). In the remark that follows this paragraph Hegel comments that “animal magnetism has played a part in ousting the untrue, finite interpretation of Spirit from the standpoint of the understanding” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 15; Hegel 1971, 6). In other words, animal magnetism constitutes empirical disconfirmation of the modern “physicalist” model of the mind. In animal magnetism, Spirit’s power to rise above space and time is “manifest in sensuous existence itself” (Hegel 1986, Vol. 10, 16; Hegel 1971, 7).

We will now return to Schelling and briefly discuss his interest in the spirit world and in the writings of the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Schelling was by no means the first of the German idealists to develop an interest in Swedenborg. Kant was so intrigued by his claims to have glimpsed other worlds that he went to the trouble of purchasing (at considerable expense) Swedenborg's eight-volume work *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–1756). Kant subsequently produced a short book about him, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated Through Dreams of Metaphysics* (*Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik*, 1766), which takes a caustic and sceptical tone toward Swedenborg. Recent scholarship has suggested, however, that Kant's attitude toward the seer was far more positive than the tone of his book might suggest, and that some of Kant's most important ideas may have been influenced by him.²¹ Although Schelling read *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, his interest in Swedenborg was primarily awakened, once again, by Oetinger.

Oetinger corresponded with Swedenborg and translated portions of his work. In 1765, he published *Swedenborg's and Other's Earthly and Heavenly Philosophies* (*Swedenborgs und anderer irdische und himmlische Philosophie*). This work so enraged ecclesiastical authorities in Württemberg that they declared it “an offense against religion and theology,” confiscated copies, and banned Oetinger from publishing further (Hanegraaff 2007, 73–74).²² What the authorities failed to perceive, however, was Oetinger's critical distance from Swedenborg. A biblical literalist, Oetinger believed he had found in Swedenborg a fellow opponent of the allegorical approach to interpreting scripture, popular at that time among rationalist philosophers (Hanegraaff 2007, 71). However, Oetinger was unable to reconcile himself to Swedenborg's mechanical philosophy of nature. Nor could he accept his separation of the natural and spiritual realm – his placing of nature “outside” of God. Hanegraaff correctly describes Oetinger as ultimately “rejecting Swedenborg's dualism in favour of Böhme's panentheism” (Hanegraaff 2007, 72).

As a first glimpse of Schelling's keen interest in Swedenborg, consider the testimony of the Swedish Romantic poet Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom (1790–1855), who has left us a record of a conversation he had with Schelling and Baader in 1818. Atterbom reports that both men spoke of Swedenborg “with the greatest esteem” and that both were convinced that “he really had had communication with spirits from a sphere other than this visible one” (quoted in Horn 1997, 31–32). However, Schelling never refers to Swedenborg by name in his works. In the dialogue *Clara*, which we will discuss in a moment, he refers to Swedenborg indirectly as “the Swedish spirit-seer” or “the Northern spirit-seer.” Even Schelling's letters contain no direct references to Swedenborg.

Schelling appears to have become especially interested in Swedenborg and in the existence of the spirit world upon the death of his wife Caroline in September 1809, which came as a terrible blow. Between 1810 and 1820, he made various attempts to develop a philosophy of the spirit world. Benz has argued that the ideas in *Clara* were influenced by Swedenborg, and Friedemann Horn, a student of Benz, has expanded his argument to make the case for Swedenborg's influence on the 1810 *Stuttgart Lectures* and the 1812 polemic against F.H. Jacobi.²³

It is in the *Lectures* that, for the first time, Schelling offers his thoughts on the spirit world and survival after death. Schelling's earlier *Naturphilosophie* argued for the "spiritualization" of the physical world: nature, Schelling maintained, is a great chain of being the highest point of which is the emergence of human spirit from mere materiality. Spirit thus constitutes the being of nature, given that it is nature's *telos*: that for the sake of which the natural world arose and developed. According to the Schelling of the *Lectures*, the next step beyond the spiritualization of nature (the emergence of spirit from matter), is the "corporealization" of spirit; the formation of *Geistlichkeit*, the "spirit body," a concept we have already encountered in Oetinger.

As Horn puts it, "the point where nature crosses over directly into the world of spirits ... is attained only in the human" (Horn 1997, 101). Schelling tells us that death is an alchemical transmutation in which spirit is not absolutely separated from body but only from the "evil" element in body which is opposed to spirit. Death is a reduction of the person "to the essential" (*reductio ad essentiam*), "the physical reduced to its essence" (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 7, 476; Schelling 1994, 237). In other words, it is *Essentification*, a concept Schelling derives from Oetinger, as discussed earlier. Using a well-known alchemical term, Schelling insists that "what is left behind is a [mere] *caput mortuum*" (a worthless residue, literally "dead head"; Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 7, 476; Schelling 1994, 237).²⁴

Schelling's dialogue *Clara*, subtitled by his son Karl "On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World" (*über den Zusammenhang der Natur mit der Geisterwelt*), is of uncertain date, though Horn believes it is contemporaneous with the *Stuttgart Lectures*. For reasons that are unclear, Schelling requested that the manuscript be destroyed upon his death. Fortunately, his son disobeyed these instructions and preserved, and later published, *Clara*. The dialogue offers no proof of a spirit world, but instead proceeds from the assumption that such a world exists. The theories set forth in *Clara* (in a rather tentative fashion) are of a piece with those in the *Stuttgart Lectures*. Here we are told that death is a "perfection": what one gains at death "is the perfection of that very thing toward which he most strove in this life and that therefore must necessarily be something higher than this present life" (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 9, 61; Schelling 2002, 45). Death

is an “elevation into a higher potency, into a really different and higher world” (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 9, 62; Schelling 2002, 46). Contrary to what is often thought, death is not a “last sleep” but “an awakening” (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 9, 63; Schelling 2002, 46). The condition that follows death is described by Schelling as “a clairvoyance [literally: ‘clear seeing’] uninterrupted by waking up” (Schelling 1856–1861, Vol. 9, 65; Schelling 2002, 48). Horn has also demonstrated conclusively that several passages in *Clara* are virtually quotations from Swedenborg’s 1758 work *Earths in the Universe* (*De Telluribus in Mundo Nostro Solari*) (Horn 1997, 27–30).

In conclusion, we have seen that there is an abundance of evidence supporting the thesis that both Schelling and Hegel were seriously interested in matters “esoteric.” And there is much else that I have not been able to discuss here, particularly regarding Hegel. For example: Hegel’s remarks on Giordano Bruno in the 1805 *Lectures*; his study, in the company of Baader, of selections from Meister Eckhart (which resulted in Hegel quoting Eckhart in the 1823–1824 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*); Hegel’s cryptic reference to the Rosicrucians in the Preface to the 1821 *Philosophy of Right*; the possible influence on Hegel of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202), and so on.

Is there a lesson in all of this? I believe that there is. Most scholars of German philosophy tend to resist the idea that Schelling and Hegel were influenced by esotericism. They sometimes either ignore or downplay the evidence, and they tend to understand Schelling’s and Hegel’s intellectual development solely in terms of their relationship to canonical philosophy, especially Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte. In part, this is due to lack of familiarity with other traditions and texts. However, it is also unquestionably true that historians of philosophy tend to view their subject through a modern, progressive lens: as the long march of reason in history, triumphantly dispelling superstition and unreason. But if this modern progressivism itself has deep roots in “the irrational,” then we must come to terms with the real possibility that it may be just another superstition.

Notes

- 1 For a full discussion of my own interpretation of the meaning of “esotericism” see the Introduction to Magee 2016.
- 2 I cannot develop this point here, but see Magee 2020.
- 3 I have cited German editions first, followed (often) by English translations. Hegel makes similar statements in other works, especially the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*. See Hegel (1984c, 333); see also Hegel (1985, 125).

- 4 I discuss this text in much greater detail in Magee 2013.
- 5 The quotations are translated in Harris 1983.
- 6 See Magee 2013.
- 7 See Davis (2007, 102), for a discussion of this issue.
- 8 See Brown (1977, 22; 264).
- 9 The passage is translated by James Gutmann in the introduction to his edition of Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*. Gutmann, *Schelling: Of Human Freedom* (Chicago: Open Court, 1936), xlvii.
- 10 See Benz 1983 and Schneider 1937. See also Dickey 1987. Dickey, however, has almost nothing to say about Swabian speculative pietism.
- 11 See also Oetinger 1969, 407.
- 12 For a discussion see Scholem (1946, 268, 275–276).
- 13 Schelling wrote several versions of *Die Weltalter* between 1811 and 1815.
- 14 I have altered this translation slightly to make it more literal.
- 15 I have altered this translation slightly to make it more literal. The idea of twin forces of contraction and expansion also appears in *Die Weltalter*, where Schelling also calls them “systole and diastole.” It is a development of the “will of the ground” and “will of the understanding” which appear in the *Freiheitsschrift*.
- 16 See Brown 151–193 for a detailed discussion of the Boehmean influence on the *Stuttgart Lectures*. On the parallels in the *Stuttgart Lectures* between Schelling's ideas and Oetinger's, see also Schulze 1957.
- 17 See Magee 2008 and 2009.
- 18 See Magee (2008, 232).
- 19 This material is treated in greater detail in Magee 2012.
- 20 Hegel also engages in certain esoteric anatomical speculations inspired by G.H. Schubert's 1814 work *Die Symbolik des Traumes*. See Magee 2012.
- 21 See Johnson 2001.
- 22 For more detailed information see Chapter Four of Benz 1947.
- 23 See Benz 1947, 1979, and Horn 1997.
- 24 For a discussion of *caput mortuum* and the use of this term by Hegel, see Magee (2008, 164–165).

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8 Hegel and Levinas on the Notion of Esoteric Thought

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Introduction

This chapter aims to reconsider the notion of esotericism in two prominent continental thinkers coming from different philosophical backgrounds: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Emmanuel Levinas. In order to clearly set forth the main argument of this study, esotericism needs to be explicitly defined.¹ To define the notion of esotericism, I borrow Magee’s view that esotericism “has tended to arise within the context of a religious tradition as a kind of the inner meaning of the religion (especially in the case of Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition), as a hidden intellectual spirituality” (2016, xiii).² Philosophically speaking, esoteric thought refers to inner methods of any sort, including ones that are sceptical, ontological, atheistic, and materialistic. Concerning the relationship between philosophy and esotericism, Leo Strauss has provided a fruitful discussion. As Shadia Drury correctly puts it, Strauss was the first philosopher to integrate esotericism with philosophy by saying that:

[The hypothesis that] philosophy must remain hidden does not mean that it ought not to play a significant role in public life (which means to avoid or marginalize exotericism). On the contrary, appearing in its exoteric garb as political philosophy it is the creator of the noble lies and pious frauds without which civilization would perish.

(1985, 333).

This study, however, focuses mainly on how Hegel and Levinas understand esotericism in relation to thinking (or thinking of thinking), and whether the latter can be justified outside of the esoteric inner dialectic. Esotericism, philosophically speaking, is particularly accompanied by the limits of (non-)conceptual language (Voogt 2021b, 1–22 and 2021a, 616–627; Kleber 2019, 259–272). I will come back to this later.

At first glance, according to the “traditional view”,³ Hegel, (first) as a logician and (second) as a phenomenologist, contends that esoteric thought is fully self-critical, meriting an immanent deduction as a presuppositionless condition of thought (Houlgate 2006, 27, 437). Therefore, any unwarranted assumption about esoteric thought must be rejected if, and only if, we posit (radical) presuppositionlessness as a philosophical requirement. For thought, according to Hegel, is neither a self-conscious intellectual activity nor pure judgement (ibid., 27–28). Esoteric thought is initially understood by Hegel as “not to be something determinate – not to be a *what* or an *it* – but to be sheer indeterminacy or utterly indeterminate immediacy” (ibid., 40). The categories of esoteric thought, to Hegel, must be presuppositionless, thus giving priority to the fact that the “true” is a system that is dialectically grounded on immanence rather than transcendence (ibid., 434; Stern 1990, 19–33). Hegel, therefore, according to the “orthodox view” (Houlgate 2006, 54–59), rejects external criticism because, he thinks, this would bring dogmatism into philosophy, thereby impairing free thinking. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task to decide whether immanent development is reduced to exteriority, because the distinction between interiority and exteriority had already collapsed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which comes before the *Logic*.⁴ The latter, according to the traditional line of thought, does not develop into an interior realm precisely because there is in fact no exterior realm. However, this chapter endeavours to explore whether Hegelian thinking can be constituted and justified outside of esotericism as Levinas thoroughly explains in his work *Totality and Infinity* (1969).⁵

This chapter explores not only the different role esotericism plays in Hegel’s and Levinas’s thought but also strives to detect their philosophical points of convergence on the notion of esotericism and its relation (if any) to exoteric thought. Esotericism, on the one hand, is immanently presented in Hegel’s thought as the completely “indeterminate, groundless being which serves as the ground of the dialectical process” (Houlgate 2006, 32). For Levinas, to the contrary, the esoteric is shaped by transcendence, presented in the other-than-me, that is the Other.⁶ In other words, Levinas contends that exteriority precedes and gives meaning to esoteric thought through radical alterity.⁷ Levinas (1969, 68–69) pressingly contrasts the notion of the Other with the plural of the I, neither considered as “we” nor as the Buberian idea of the I-Thou. While for Hegel, influenced by Schelling’s interest in esotericism (Pitkänen 2019, 497–504), esoteric thinking is that which is always already *given*; however, for Levinas, it is exactly the opposite: it is exteriority that precedes and gives meaning to

esoteric thought. “Early”⁸ Levinas (1969, 73) criticises Hegel’s language of the esoteric as unchanging, applicable only to what is *given* in sensuous experience and therefore devoid of any relevance to human relationships. However, this chapter will hopefully shed some additional light on the underlying affinity between Hegel’s and Levinas’s notions of esotericism, arguing that not every discourse is a relation with interiority.

In contrast to Hegel, Levinas, especially in his works *Outside the Subject* (1993) and *Humanism for the Other* (2003), gives priority to the transcendence and alterity of thought rather than to immanent deduction by claiming that esotericism does not have a merely metaphysical definition in a Kantian sense, that is, “the body of synthetic *a priori* principles that constitutes knowledge by pure reason” (Houlgate 2006, 27). Hegel, as he puts it in the *Logic*, not only establishes an interconnection between metaphysics and speculative philosophy but also raises the prospect of an anti-metaphysical, post-Kantian dialectic in favour of speculative naturalism (Hegel 1999, 61, 63; Giladi 2016, 149–162), as does Levinas in terms of an ethical-transcendental metaphysics (Bergo 1999, 37–54; Houser 2019, 587–614). On the one hand, “early” Levinas, in his work *Totality and Infinity*, vehemently criticises Hegel’s immanent deduction as an inadequate dialectic of esoteric thought, as it is unable to produce an alteration in its own categories, insisting that those categories are deemed to be applicable only to what is *given* in sensuous experience and not to things in themselves or to other human beings. Similarly, as Levinas puts it, “the relation with the other as a relation with his transcendence puts into question the brutal spontaneity of one’s immanent destiny” (Levinas 1969, 203).

On the other hand, “later”⁹ Levinas, in his work *Otherwise than Being of Beyond Essence* (1991), seeks affinities to integrate and detach (to some extent) interiority with exteriority, and immanence with transcendence, since he realised, in the late period of his philosophical scholarship, that fundamental ontology could not be overcome.¹⁰ Hence, the purpose of this chapter: to build bridges between the Hegelian and Levinasian dialectic, surfacing philosophical implications in support of the fact that not every discourse is a relation with esotericism if by that we mean that not every discourse is to be understood only esoterically. In accordance with this, I argue that the analytical method of justifying the possibility of constructing a reflective equilibrium between Hegel’s and Levinas’s proposals for reducing esotericism to exoteric thought is but through the transcendental understanding of speculative philosophy and conceptual language. In this sense, Levinas’s ethical thinking of exteriority should be read as a nuanced philosophical vindication of Hegel’s speculative philosophy.

Common Sense as a Reconciliation Between Hegel and Levinas

It is also worth pointing out the philosophical possibility of determining a “common sense” (Giladi 2018, 1–17) that will make possible a fruitful exchange between the philosophies of Levinas and Hegel on the notion of esotericism. This dialectical perspective could only be achieved by reconciling the notion of (non-)conceptual language in relation to (a) the limits of narrative (MacDonald 2005, 182–194), (b) being as truth and unity (Trisokkas 2017, 100–104), (c) esotericism as initiation (Franks 1993, 140–201), and (d) the relation between conscience and consciousness (Keintzel 2021, 175–202). In this sense, I argue that Hegel and Levinas endeavour to unpack the decisive role (non-)conceptual language plays in relation to, and in terms of, immanence and transcendence. There is, therefore, an opportunity for a fruitful engagement in comparing Hegel’s and Levinas’s views on the question of language in relation to the issue of immanence/transcendence. However, the starting point for this enterprise should be Levinas’s response to Hegelian language. Thus, the discussion is (and ought to be) not only speculative but textually anchored as well. The crucial role of ineffability is going to appear here and there in this chapter, and I will define and thoroughly explain it as a technical and superficial term in discussing the Levinasian and Hegelian conceptions of esotericism.

For Levinas, the question of esotericism is the question of being-together in language, that is, of facing the other through ethical language. The transcendent is the human other, which is different from the ontological line of thought where language “would consist in suppressing” and/or absorbing the other into the same (Levinas 1969, 73). In contrast, for Hegel, esotericism is closely integrated with the tendency of thought’s movement which always returns to itself as a *given*, whereas this “negative reality” (Houlgate 2006, 309–311) intends to absorb infinity within a finite framework that interprets being *qua* being (ibid., 409).¹¹ Hegel therefore concludes that “the finite and the infinite are inseparable” (ibid., 410) and that “this absolutely fluid continuity of *pure knowing* refuses to put itself into communication with the other which renounced its separate being-for-self” (Hegel 1977, 406).

First, an attempt will be made here to present an orthodox/traditional view of Levinas’s critique of Hegel and vice versa, before pointing out their affinities. After having presented Levinas’s critique of Hegel, I will focus on Levinas’s phenomenology of the interhuman with (or without) the elusive trace of God’s (non)phenomenality (Levinas 1998b) in relation to Hegel’s speculative philosophy (Voogt 2021b, 1–22). That, in my opinion, will strengthen the argument and make it more convincing. However, Levinas’s

critique of Hegel's insistence on esoteric thought must be interpreted as a nuanced vindication of his own relation to exoteric thought.

Transcendental Speculative Idealism as a Necessary Condition of Relationalism

It has been argued in modern philosophical literature that the Hegelian view of language¹² is inevitably incompatible with Levinasian ethics. Hegel's strict position in the *Logic* does not allow any space for affinities with Levinas's ethical insistence on infinity (outside finitude).¹³ The *Logic* seems to play a "foundational" role in the system if by this one just means that Being has a logical (categorical) dimension. Thus, in his *Logic*, Hegel insists on creating a system that gives priority to interiority and esotericism within an ontological framework while arguing that metaphysical intuition has nothing to do with speculative idealism.¹⁴ Being also has a natural and a spiritual dimension, so these dimensions can be said to be "foundational" as well. Therefore, if there cannot be *Logos* without *Nature* and *Spirit* (that is, the concreteness of foundationalism in *Realphilosophy*), then at the same time there cannot be reality without speculative idealism. The *Logos* (speech),¹⁵ in the Hegelian dialectic in the *Logic*,¹⁶ provides logical criteria through the in-or-for-itself universal scheme for developing and expressing the idea of human subjectivity.¹⁷ Does this statement provide a necessary and sufficient condition for Hegel to always start from the *esoteric*, defined as a sheer indeterminate, to figure out the properties of thinking *qua* thinking? Must, as it is mentioned above, phenomenologists of thinking deny that thinking can be found outside of esotericism, or, in other words, must they deny that its meaning be constituted outside of esotericism? It is, at this point, of immense significance to underline that Hegel's speculative idealism (especially in the Philosophy of Spirit and the Philosophy of Nature) emphasises the non-metaphysical character of thinking by asserting that *logos* is not only "the reason of that which is": "it is least of all the *logos* which should be left outside the science of logic" (Hegel 1999, 39/1, 30).¹⁸ Thus, the speculative notion of *logos* gives some value to the argument that thinking for Hegel is not necessarily incompatible with exoteric thought. This is, therefore, the reason why this chapter aims at arguing in favour of the fact that the notion of the non-metaphysical or speculative dimension of *logos*, that is, the unspeakable *logos* – the ineffable – reveals that there is a robust possibility to find common ground between the Hegelian and Levinasian dialectics of thinking. And as Keintzel correctly puts it,

both [thinkers] contend that an ego that knows no [external] interlocutor anchored in space and time is not a privileged one but rather

contradicts the basic idea of humanity rooted in collectivity and plurality. Both have spoken out against an exaggerated understanding of rationality.

(2021, 196)

Thus, if we consider Hegel's and Levinas's texts in more depth, we can build bridges between the philosophical gap between their takes on language. This is done precisely by reconciling (at least to some extent) the point of contradiction between their approaches to the limits of esoteric thought.

To develop a philosophical argument that strives to reconcile two extremely different philosophical traditions is not an easy task. On the one hand, Hegelian language, even if it sometimes contains theological and/or speculative hints of the human condition,¹⁹ does not allow us to escape from the logical presuppositions of developing a strictly philosophical system. Interiority is a *must* for Hegel's ontological criteria to talk about thinking and to explain the *a priori* universal condition of Hegel's ontological criteria.²⁰ For instance, Hegel contends that the human mind contains a large part of the spiritual intelligibility derived from the Absolute Spirit.²¹ Thus, we can infer that, if the human mind has divine origins, then human language is also divine and/or is the mediator of the Spirit within human communication and history. What I am trying to say, introductorily, is that for Hegel, divine language has a crucial interconnectedness with human language. The synthesis of language as a part of how to understand the notion of the self and its relation to the Spirit is a necessary condition to define thinking or thinking of thinking. Levinas's view, though not far from the above considerations regarding divine/human interrelation, incorporates a transcendental pragmatism²² which is quite crucial to make comprehensible the effort to build a reflective equilibrium between Hegel and Levinas. I will now try to analyse this point.

The Hegelian notion of language derives not only from his strict semiotic system but also from Ancient Greek and Medieval theologico-philosophical traditions, such as the Platonic theory of the Good,²³ the Aristotelian realism,²⁴ the Plotinian *One*,²⁵ the Augustinian transcendentalism of the mind,²⁶ and the Thomistic idea of the penetration of divine language into the human mind.²⁷ For instance, Hegel adopts Aquinas's view that whatever humans think of derives from the divine Spirit's infinite mind.²⁸ In other words, human language, mediating the mind, expresses divine thought. According to Hegel as well as to the neo-Thomistic tradition, Absolute divine Spirit has no other way to reveal itself as Absolute Knowledge²⁹ than through the human condition: "In God understanding (knowing) and being are the same".³⁰ This phenomenology of Spirit which reveals itself through human mental properties is always for-itself and

in-itself, absorbing all external experience into the core of subjectivity in a condition that is called *totality*. This total thinking is always universal, and its power encompasses and precedes exteriority. The subject's esotericism, that is self-consciousness, is always the foremost criterion of human beings' existence and the turning point to understand the first principle of ontology.

On the other hand, totality for Levinas is quite repressive, and it has no power to transcend ontological criteria. Levinas admits that totality of the subject dominates and absorbs any form of ethical and/or transcendental metaphysics in the modern era, especially after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.³¹ Moreover, it severely lacks a vital capacity to express the inexpressible, that is, *otherness*. By referring to "otherness", Levinas means that language always needs an interlocutor who, as a passive audience, gives meaning to communication. This relationship is enacted not merely with the other's freedom and autonomy³² but first and foremost with radical responsibility. Language, for Levinas, is a matter of non-reciprocal asymmetrical responsibility.³³ This view cannot but infringe on the boundaries of totality by prioritising the *saying* and not merely the *said* (Bergo 1999, 169–205). However, as I will explain below, the fact that, for Levinas, language's *presence* needs to be reconsidered within an eschatological framework where the visible meets the invisible, as well as reality meets the unconscious (the ineffable), may be the point of convergence between Hegel's speculative idealism and Levinas's divine-command ethics regarding the debate on whether thinking can be found outside esotericism.

As shown, both thinkers contribute their respective insights on the notion of the ineffable, viewed as a necessary and sufficient condition for language, humanity and the divine. The crucial question now is whether the inexpressible can be said to be above and beyond knowledge. For instance, it is of immense importance to explain whether the limits of conceptual language can be surpassed without infringing on transcendental pragmatism – something which is non-negotiable for Hegel. However, pragmatism, in some cases, can exceed knowledge in the context of ethics, which is based on transcendental intersubjectivity (Bergo 1999, 82–104). This is exactly the crucial point of a potential reflective equilibrium between Hegel and Levinas concerning their treatments of the limits of (non-)conceptual language and the role of the ineffable in esoteric thought.

Before the crucial issue of the ineffable and its relation to universal language is properly addressed, it is urgent to interpret Hegel's notion of historicity and how speculative metaphysics (to some extent) affects language. While Hegel puts aside the role of Kantian metaphysics, he strives to present the major feature of blind operation of causal necessity (BOCN) in the rational mind as well as in history – something that has been the

turning point of the post-Hegelian era.³⁴ This causal necessity of thought can only be construed as universality which absorbs all knowledge as well as historical facts from the beginning of conscious speculative thought. As Hegel puts it, “the system is what emerges when thought suspends all its assumptions about itself, considers nothing but the sheer indeterminate thought of being, and holds itself open to what that thought shows itself to be” (Houlgate 2006, 52). In other words, as far as Hegel contends in his *Logic*, the most stable thought is the rational one, which implies a substance as its subject and which takes the form of forcible causality.³⁵ Conceptual meaning, according to Hegel, is always immediate and integrated with universality³⁶ through self-identity, which makes it the basis of an unsuitable explanation due to its simplicity and rational *in-itself* agency (Hegel 2010, 530).

Conceptual language is mainly integrated with logic which, according to Hegel, “is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself” (ibid., 29). But first we need to analyse how Hegel approaches the definition of language in order to make sense of the inexpressible and the unconscious ineffable, which pushes thought to be externalised. The Hegelian dialectic unpacks the notion of language within an instrumental speculative method where negation and the supersession of both the world and the self – as an enclosed unit – are given (Habib 2019, 120). Language, according to Hegel, at first glance is full of conventional and arbitrary signs, which is a point of view based on the pre-Socratic existential view of logos,³⁷ on Platonic forms,³⁸ and on the Aristotelian Being *qua* being.³⁹ From my point of view, Hegel says the most about the “waking” of language in the psychology chapter where internality and externality play a big role in thinking (Hegel [1990], §318, 319, 326, 335, 353).⁴⁰

Esotericism Between Speculative Idealism and Phenomenology

The orthodox/traditional line of thought defends that thinking cannot be found outside of esotericism because of the prioritisation of individualism over relationalism. By relationalism, I mean that selfhood escapes from itself as a *given*, giving priority to otherness as exterior to being (Chappell 2013, 32). Taking this view into consideration, being is always related to itself, with no need to receive or adopt external experience or intersubjective apprehension. Being *qua* being (Shields 2012, 343–350) belongs to its own thinking without any presuppositions except those derived from immanent deduction (*Ableitung*). However, I argue that Hegelian speculative criteria along with Levinas’s divine-command ethics force thought to be externalised outside of esotericism by giving priority to relationality. In post-modern scholarship of ethics (Bauman 1993; Madison and Marty

1999), especially in the analytic tradition, thinking is interconnected with the notion of the Good. From Parmenides to post-Hegelian metaphysics, the ethical, as an *a priori* condition of the self, depends, at least, on a necessary precondition: relationalism (Grondin 2012, 182–194, 243–246). Relationalism is inseparable from exteriority, which imbues the self with the conception of the Good as emerging from outside. This reflects a practical – and not merely cognitive – commitment to the living consciousness of others (Noë 2009, 33). Several thinkers who defend the thesis that individualism presupposes relationalism aim their efforts at decentring the subject outside of the concept and the categories of being⁴¹ (Levinas 1961, 36–37 and 1969, 45–46; Schrijvers 2011, 12–14, 167–169, 198–201), denying that the latter reveals itself only ontologically as merely a self-enclosed unit that objectifies anything except itself (Scruton 2012, 166). Thus, we can assume that relationalism (a) prevents being *qua* being from absorbing the other to the self (Ferro 2012, 26–51) as well as (b) prevents the rejection of adopting a test procedure – criterialism⁴² – in order to define thinking strictly esoterically (Chappell 2011, 1–27). In brief, “criterialism” refers to the fact that the “actual possession of the criterial properties is necessary and sufficient for membership of the primary moral constituency” (Chappell 2011, 2, n. 4).

Coming back to the role of ineffability and its relation to exoteric thought, Aristotle contends that ineffability consists in love, which externalises thinking: “to love a person we must wish for that person’s good for that person’s sake, not for ours”, as only the Good is loved (Vlastos 1973, 6, n. 26). Houlgate, in parallel, correctly reminds us that, according to Hegel,

when I am in love, I do not wish to be an independent person in my own right and ... if I were, I would feel deficient and incomplete. ... Indeed, in genuine love, I find myself in another person ... Love is the incarnation of true infinity.

(2006, 431)

The above definition derives an immense part of its philosophical weight of the Levinasian sense of metaphysical non-reciprocal asymmetrical maternal love, which also justifies the crucial role of ineffability through love (Sandford 2000, 82–109).

However, Levinas disagrees with Aristotle, who prioritises the self over the other by using ontological criteria, that is, the Aristotelian narcissism which derives from *φρόνησις* (phronesis) (Derrida 2001, 102; Bowler 2008, 132, 134–136). Levinas also raises objections to the Platonic idea of the Good.⁴³ Specifically, Levinas proposes exteriority through transcendental and dynamic ethical substances integrated with quasi-theological

attributes, such as absolute alterity and passivity (Hofmeyr 2016, 177). Levinas, contrary to Greek and fundamental ontology, argues that thinking, especially in virtue ethics, requires an intersubjective social relationship with others (1998a, 1–11). Moreover, for him, subjectivity of thinking is grounded on a relationship to the other person who assumes in his turn quasi-theological terms. It is this consideration that points to interpreting Levinas's ethical outlook on thinking as a form of divine-command ethics (Chappell 2012, 6).

It is also crucial to explain the decisive role of infinity in Hegel and Levinas in order to clearly understand the speculative procedure of the reduction of thinking in the exterior realm. Hegel would disagree with Levinas's claim, that is, on the concept of infinity, as the former integrates infinity within a finite framework and the latter within a transcendental framework (Houlgate 2006, 433). Levinas, on the other hand, insists that infinity lies beyond and over finite beings – something that Hegel vehemently rejects. Levinas, as a religious ethicist, derives from Descartes the idea that the only true infinite being is God, who exceeds and transcends the realm of the finite (*ibid.*, 433–434). While ultimately denying this line of thought as “bad infinity”, Hegel calls “true infinity” the outcome of “the process that is generated by finite things themselves: it is nothing beyond immanent things”. Hegel, in sum, prefers the Spinozist-Platonist term “immanent infinity” (*ibid.*, 433, n. 25), thereby integrating infinity with “radical immanence rather than transcendence” (*ibid.*, 435; Hegel 1990, §364). To my mind, Hegel's reduction of the infinite within a finite framework automatically relegates it into an exterior realm outside of esotericism, that is of history. Levinas, indeed, at this point, reacts quite excessively, insisting mistakenly on a mere transcendental infinity which has nothing to do with the real cosmos. Levinas, in other words, understands the only truly infinite being he acknowledges – God – to exceed and transcend the realm of the finite. However, Houlgate provides us with a clear and consistent answer to how Levinas further engages with the concept of infinity: “Levinas argues that finite human beings stand in relation to the transcendent infinite – both to the infinite that is God and the infinite that is the ‘face’ of the other human being” (*ibid.*, 434). By adopting Houlgate's claim, we can then argue and justify that the face of the other, which is “the trace of God” (Dimitrova 2011) for Levinas, is that from which transcendental infinity is reduced to finite reality. Therefore, thinking can be found outside of esotericism, that is within the human mind and in ordinary consciousness of human life.

It is also worth analysing the fact that the Hegelian dialectic is “not brought to bear on the thought-determinations from outside; on the contrary, it must be considered as dwelling within them” (Hegel [1991], 82), and that “the concept is thus the form of thinking whose object is not

exterior to itself” (Tofan 2009, 376). At first glance, someone might claim that if the above statement is true, then thought cannot escape from esotericism. Philosophically speaking, does this statement imply that thought as presuppositionless must be considered only in terms of interiority via inner immanency rather than any form of exteriority? In short, have we provided valuable arguments against the orthodox view that Hegel mistakenly rejects external criticism? And, in parallel, do we have additional robust counterarguments to refute the thesis that “thought-determinations must be considered as dwelling within their essence”? The answer is to be found in the intersection between Hegel’s speculative idealism along with Levinas’s divine-command ethics.

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel contends that each category or “universal ... considered in and for itself, shows itself to be the *other* of itself” (Houlgate 2006, 42).⁴⁴ This is crucial evidence for assuming that thinking, from a speculative point of view, is not limited to a merely esoteric faculty. Rather, to the contrary, it is to be explored in the realm of exteriority, that is, otherness. Thus, based on the argument above, we can infer that thinking has a twofold nature: that of the for-and-in-itself and that for the other-than-itself, and these two categories are tied by negation. Thus, according to Hegel’s speculative philosophy, only together can the two (the for-and-in-itself and the other-than-itself) realise their truth – both esoterically and exoterically. In parallel, there is other evidence pointing to the exteriority of thinking, that is the concreteness of the concept of thinking. Due to the fact that thinking is able “to create a concept about things, this concept (along with its most unmediated forms: the judgement and the syllogism) cannot consist of determinations or of relations that would be alien and exterior to things” (Tofan 2009, 376).

As mentioned above, speculative idealism, according to Hegel, plays a decisive and fundamental role in the process of reducing exteriority to interiority. But the question remains: can thinking be constituted and justified outside of esotericism? And if so, does it depend on a philosophical or an ordinary consciousness? In order to answer this question, we need to integrate exoteric thought with common sense and its ordinary outlook on consciousness. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel provides clear evidence that thinking can be exoteric through ordinary consciousness and common sense, even though speculative philosophy *per se* allies with a philosophical notion of consciousness and thus rejects such an approach. Hegel, by criticising common sense as a worldview, obviously does not intend to reject it completely as rotten theory, yet, on the contrary, to vindicate it as the only way to justify exoteric thought (Hegel 1977, 43, §70).

The clear giveaway is that Hegel stresses how the wise path to knowledge and spiritual thinking is paved only by inner philosophical reasoning and speculative consciousness, while ordinary consciousness

and common sense are inadequate methods which have been responsible for the downfall of (ancient) metaphysics (ibid.). He goes as far as to suggest that common sense as a non-philosophical ground fits only uneducated, simple-minded individuals. On the flip side, Hegel intends to show that the opposition between the common-sense understanding of consciousness and the philosophical understanding does not simply replace ordinary consciousness. On the contrary, as Paul Giladi correctly puts it, “ordinary consciousness is sublated in order to show how common sense and its determinate negation dialectically interrelate” and that “the result of arriving at a speculative understanding of the mind-world relation is a harmonious relationship between common sense and speculative philosophy, by virtue of the critical grounds provided by the latter for the commitments of common-sense realism that are implicit in ordinary consciousness” (2018, 11, 12).

Martin Heidegger, who was influenced by Hegel and, in turn, influenced Levinas, pays particular attention to esotericism and serves as a valuable paradigm for this discussion (Waite 1998, 603–651). He thus provides an invaluable remark on how both philosophical and ordinary consciousness affect thinking as conceived outside of esotericism – that is, in common sense and daily life, with an understanding powered by relationalism. As Heidegger points out “philosophy, on the other hand, has as its accomplishment not an objectification of being, but rather a world in which one can live. Philosophy, therefore, occurs in and for life” (Bowler 2008, 127–128). Heidegger clarifies that ordinary consciousness, common sense, and relationalism are sufficient conditions to justify that thinking can also be found outside of esotericism. If we assume that “ontic sciences and ontology” (ibid., 127) merit philosophical consciousness, that is esotericism, and “have as their accomplishment an objectification of beings or of the being of beings, respectively” (ibid.), in contrast, “*Dasein's* activity of possessing a world is the relational sense of the expression *life*” (ibid.), which is an implication of common sense for ordinary consciousness. This Heideggerian process of reducing exteriority to interiority helps us to indicate the stakes of the Hegel-Levinas issue on esotericism.⁴⁵

Hegel's and Levinas's philosophical positions would also converge in that thought is transferred from interiority to exteriority through passivity, even though they use different philosophical methods to produce their claim regarding this issue. Hegel proceeds logically and Levinas ethically. Hegel defends a passive willingness to “let go”⁴⁶ of our cherished certainties, assumptions, and prejudices, and he encourages a willingness to let our thinking be guided and determined by what is immanent in the matter at hand (more simply, the passive willingness to “let be”) and to get rid passively of all of one's own reflections and opinions. Hence, to

this extent, philosophising is viewed as “wholly passive” (Hegel 1991, 305, §238).

Levinas also defends the notion of passivity but from a different perspective than Hegel. He explored his thesis in terms of an ethical and transcendental framework rather than from a logical standpoint. Levinas contends that before anything else, thinking or thinking of ourselves is primordial passivity due to its eternal responsibility (Morgan 2011, 114). For Levinas, in contrast to Hegel, passivity is not directly thematisable. It is prior to any representable objectification and/or manifestation of being (1991, 92). And, as Bettina Bergo correctly points out, Levinas’s

goal is to evince the phenomenological priority of passivity, before it is set into dualisms of interiority-exteriority, “man and things” ... The other-in-the-same is undergone passively before it is represented; as an ethical and in some cases aesthetic phenomenon ... Yet the quality of this radical passivity must be approached philosophically, in the light of the intersubjective and value sources of what unfolds as ethical life, and thus as an an-archic principle of hope.

(2009, 31)

Conclusion

To conclude, what I have tried to show in this chapter is that the orthodox view remains philosophically sound in insisting that an esoteric dimension has priority in Hegel’s system in the sense of the logical/non-speculative dimension, as expounded in the *Logic* and then, as a trickledown effect, pervading the other two philosophical sciences, namely the Philosophy of Nature and the Philosophy of Spirit. Yet, one may also argue that the latter are not completely esoteric, as “the logical element” comes into contact with speculative elements of intuition and matter. That is why I conclude that the foundation thesis that thinking can only be found in internal operation cannot be right. I have also defended this alternative interpretation in my chapter: intuition and matter are elements of being-in-the-world, which makes Hegel’s account of being not completely esoteric. A glaring problem with traditional interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy, from my point of view, is that they do not take into real consideration its systematic character. By choosing not to consider the *Logic*, the Philosophy of Nature, and the Philosophy of Spirit as separate disciplines, one can identify elements that are not only esoteric.

To my mind, then, Hegel is not an esoteric philosopher, if, by this, one means that for Hegel, being is only reducible to thought. Indeed, if Hegel were an esotericist, there need not be a distinction between logic and the

other two main branches of philosophy, and logic would be the only necessary philosophical investigation. I have here defended the view that the question of whether Hegel is an esotericist can only be treated properly by taking into account the relation between the three parts of his philosophical system.

In phenomenology, Hegel raises the question of how philosophy should begin its inquisition, and he examines in detail the “exoteric thesis” that philosophy must begin with something given to consciousness. However, he then concludes that this line of thought is untenable and that what remains is that philosophy must begin without a given, that is, from what Hegel calls “thought”. This should not be taken to mean that being collapses into thought: it only means that the enquiry into being must begin from thought. Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of Spirit expound on thought as being combined with intuition (spatiotemporally), thereby accessing its schematisation. So, while Hegel’s system begins esoterically in a sense, it becomes exoteric in the process. The upshot of this discussion is that, for Hegel, thinking, or being’s thought, is both esoteric and exoteric.

For Levinas, the answer to the question of whether thought can be constituted and therefore justified outside of esotericism is easier. Levinas’s aim is to show from the beginning that exteriority precedes interiority. Everything starts from otherness and not from being-itself. Thinking is exoteric because ethics is exoteric. Thinking and being are two different realms altogether. The experience and the perception of otherness, which cannot be absorbed by esotericism, is in Levinas’s view the basic idea of thinking. Levinas gives priority to external alterity, which is not a feature of knowledge but of ethics. In fact, his radical alterity is the alterity of the absolute relation to the other, which demands our ethical response rather than a notion of “pure Being” as some impersonal interior reality. The thinking subject enters into a relationship with human beings, escaping the representation and totalisation of esotericism. For Levinas, the thinking subject calls itself to an infinite responsibility beyond itself, which is prior to interiority.

Summing up, while Levinas is convinced that thinking can apparently be found outside of esotericism, Hegel is admittedly quite sceptical about this. However, Hegel’s scepticism and criticism about thinking has no intention of rejecting exoteric thought, as it should be read as a nuanced philosophical vindication of exoteric thought in all its facets.

Notes

- 1 Concerning the notion of esotericism in general, see Magee (2016); Faivre (2010); Stuckrad (2005); Aspren and Granholm (2013); Aspren and Strube (2021); Hanegraaff (2012). Regarding the relation between philosophy and

- esotericism, see Waite (1998); Pitkänen (2019); Lampert and Lampert (1995); Clark (2015); Drury (1985); Tofan (2009); Franks (1993); De Purucker (2010); Melzer (2014).
- 2 Etymologically, the term esotericism stems from the Greek word *ἑσωτερικός*, which means internal. Plato, for instance in his dialogue *Alcibiades*, uses the expression *τά ἔσω*, meaning “the inner things”, and in his dialogue *Theaetetus* he uses *τά ἔξω*, meaning “the outside things”.
 - 3 By saying “traditional view” (or “orthodox view”), I mean the “conservative” literature that defends the contemporary philosophical *status quo* in which Hegel’s system is quite incompatible with Levinas’s ethics. There are several works regarding the Hegel-Levinas debate in the secondary literature (Bernasconi 1982 and 1986; MacDonald 2005; Keintzel 2021; Shuster 2019, 198–204; Baba 2018; Benso 2007; Irwin 2007; Uljée 2018; Peperzak 2007 and 2019; Guibal and Cross 2015; Xiushan 2008; Ambrose 2002; Williams 1992, 297–301 and 1997, 408–412; Clausen 2018).
 - 4 This is the main research question of the chapter: to investigate or justify whether immanence can be reduced to exteriority, that is, whether thinking and meaning can be found outside esotericism. Hegel’s perspective on immanent development is rooted in the idea that it involves an internal unfolding of contradictions, and he cautions against reducing it solely to external factors or exteriority. This is the traditional view of Hegel’s system as focused only on the *Philosophy of Logic* and ignoring the *Philosophy of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Nature*. My aim is therefore to make an important contribution to contemporary thought, and not only to Hegel-specific philosophical research into reality. This will be achieved by carefully working through a neglected aspect of Hegel’s system, that is, speculative philosophy which underlies on the possibility that truth about meaning can be also found outside esotericism. At this point, I am referring particularly to Hegel. Hegel’s *Logic* is esoteric: immanence, that is esoteric inner determination of thought, is a necessary and sufficient condition of thinking.
 - 5 This is presumably the reason Levinas subtitled the relevant work “An Essay on Exteriority”, as the main argument is completely a polemic against Hegel’s interiority and totality of Being – especially Section II, “Interiority and Economy” (1969, 107–183).
 - 6 The “Other” with capital “O” expresses (a) the allegoric infinite Other, something that it is extremely different and exterior to the egotic self-enclosed being (b) as well as the idea of God as the Absolute Other. The other in lower case “o” refers to human beings.
 - 7 Levinas underlines that “Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects thought and despite the opposition of self to self” (1969, 36). In contrast to the Hegelian phenomenological alterity of objects in which the ego pursues its own closure and contentment, Levinas provides a more radical alterity foreseeing “in the exposedness to alterity in the face of another the original form of openness. It even finds and sustains the openness to things or to the elements. Not only perceptions

but even sensation is seen to be wholly sustained by ethical responsibility. The sense of alterity itself maintains open every kind of openness, even that to distant terms or immediately oncoming elements. The ‘deepest’ level of life is taken to be constituted ... by a relationship of being with nothingness, but by a relationship with alterity” (1991, xvi).

- 8 This definition varies, as several scholars specialising in Levinas assert that he started his philosophy insisting on Judaic religious thought, which would be a vehement polemic against Hegel’s totality. However, during his academic scholarship – and after the Holocaust, when his family was executed in concentration camps – he definitely changed his philosophical method from existentialism to ethics. It is not meant here that ethics covers only the social and political discussion developed in an ordinary sense, but rather that Levinas’s own take on what ethics is, namely the field “wherein paradox of the infinite appears progressively in relation to the finite” (Levinas 2000, 202). For Levinas’s view on phenomenology at his early philosophical stage, see Heng (2008, 105–121). For a brief generic discussion on Levinas’s position regarding analytic and continental philosophy, and his relation to Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel together with their most important implications, see Dimitrova and Pietrzak (2018). For “early” Levinas’s critique of fundamental ontology, see Taminiaux (1997, 29) and Bergo (2005, 122–144).
- 9 “Later” Levinas refers to the reversal of his thought after *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, where he totally escaped from Hegel’s polemic regarding the totality of esotericism and Heidegger’s “ontological shadow” as well as from the phenomenological process of the Husserlean “Pure Ego”, by completely defending ethics as “first philosophy”. For more on this issue, see Peperzak (1995) and Yampolskaya (2019, 1–12).
- 10 See, for instance, the comments by Bergo, which are of immense importance in explaining that Levinas, especially in *Otherwise than Being* integrated transcendence with immanence as he realised that fundamental ontology could not be totally overcome (1999, 295, 298).
- 11 Being *qua* being refers to the study of being insofar as it is being, or existence in its most general sense, as related only to itself and not to other objects or subjects (Haas 2017, 150–170).
- 12 Concerning Hegel’s dialectic of language, there is an extended range of secondary literature. I only provide what are, from my point of view, the most comprehensive works below (Debrock 1973, 285–304; Voogt, 2021b, 1–22; O’Neill 2006; McCumber 1993; Forster 2011, 143–250; Cook 1973 and 1972, 197–211; Taylor 1985, 77–95).
- 13 For Hegel’s view on the concept of the infinite, see Desmond (2011, 115–140). For its relation to finitude, see Houlgate (2006, 239–259).
- 14 Though Hegel does not reject the existence of souls, he insists on their self-conscious inwardness, which is justified only by reason. Concerning the interiority of souls, see Theron (2018, 202–209). Concerning Hegel’s insights of (dogmatic) metaphysics, see Longuenesse (2007, 10–38, 165–191).
- 15 For Hegel’s semiology and his philosophical insights on speech and writing, see Derrida (1982, 71–108).

- 16 For a generic definition of the Hegelian dialectic, see McTaggart (2000, 8–34).
- 17 See Derrida’s comments (1982, 73).
- 18 It is worth noting at this point that the whole system is metaphysics. Its “introduction” is phenomenology. Hegel’s system is “metaphysical” because the thinking of nature and the thinking of spirit is mediated by categories, which are *a priori* independent of experience. But in the Philosophy of Nature and in the Philosophy of Spirit, these categories come into contact with experience, so, as applied, have a different character than when they are exhibited simply as logical elements. One may say that they are “schematized”. As for Hegel, “metaphysics is to consist of nothing but the empirical apprehension and the analysis of the facts of human consciousness, above all as facts, just as they are given” (1990, §367). In this sense, I argue that thinking can be also found outside esotericism. Once these categories come into contact with experience, *a posteriori*, we can argue that are externalised in common sense as well as in human life outside of the inner domain of selfhood.
- 19 For a discourse on the human condition in general, see Arendt (1998, 248–326).
- 20 Concerning Hegel’s concept of universalism related to Absolute Idealism, see Theron (2018, 210–229).
- 21 As regards the thematisation of the Absolute Being and its relation to the human mind, see Theron (2018, 78–143, 265–282).
- 22 By “transcendental pragmatism” I mean a normative and cognitive process that cannot evade epistemological criteria of knowledge, whereas apprehension and phenomenological experience are necessary and sufficient conditions of thinking. The notion of pragmatism, which derives from the Aristotelian *πράξις* (a priori justified deeds and facts) (Bowler 2008, 120–121) is only normatively justified by self-reflective and discursive reasoning where a priori conditions make experience possible (Nooteboom 2012, 138–141; Recki 2007).
- 23 Regarding Hegel’s opinion about Plato’s theory of forms, dualism, and subjectivity, see O’Neill (2019, 131–145).
- 24 For further details, see Ferrarin (2001, 234–261).
- 25 Plotinus’s view of the concept of the *One* is developed accurately by Bussanich (1996, 38–65).
- 26 For a comparative study between Hegel and Augustine, see Holsclow (2016, 43–92, 129–154).
- 27 Concerning Aquinas’s view on the definition of logic and its relation to human subjectivity and divinity, see Schmidt (1966, 1–48).
- 28 For a comprehensive discussion between Hegel and Aquinas on persons and their relation to God, see Theron (2020a, 31–34); Booth (1986, 56–89); Baur (1994, 125–134).
- 29 Hegel defines “Absolute Knowledge” in the *Science of Logic* as “the truth of all the modes of consciousness because, as the course of the *Phenomenology* brought out, it is only in absolute knowledge that the separation of the subject matter from the certainty of itself is completely resolved: truth has become equal to certainty and this certainty to truth” (2010, 29). See also Theron (2020b, 191–258).

- 30 See the Latin extract in Gornall (2006, 1a, 14, 4): “ex necessitate sequitur quod ipsum ejus intelligere sit ejus essentia et ejus esse”.
- 31 For Levinas’s vehement critique of the Western ontological tradition as well as his view on social phenomenology and meta-humanism, see his interview for Guwy (2008, 297–310).
- 32 However, Levinas would agree with Hegel’s claim that “the will is in the first place the process of dispersion and the suspension of an inclination through the other, and the partial gratification which it entails, through another to infinity” (1990, §398).
- 33 Regarding Levinas’s meta-humanism and its properties as well as the specific measures of selfhood, see Nooteboom (2012, 162–184).
- 34 Concerning the origins and foundations of Laplacian determinism, see the comprehensive article by M. van Strien (2014). In addition, regarding necessity and freedom in Hegel’s philosophy, see S. Sedwick (2023, 67–97). Specifically, Sedwick discusses the “internal versus external” debate in detail (ibid., 89–93) by giving priority to internal thinking: “the purpose responsible for the necessity of world history is internal rather than external” (ibid., 95).
- 35 As regards Hegel’s conceptual materialism and the role of substance as subject, see Felgenhauer (2022).
- 36 Levinas, at this point, agrees with Hegel’s insistence on universality; however, for Levinas, “to proclaim universality ... is to shock reason itself ... as interiority cannot replace universality” (1969, 241).
- 37 One of the most crucial pieces of writing concerning this issue comes from Heraclitus. Heraclitus, in attempting to show the existential and the speculative notion of language (*logos*), contends that: “Therefore, it is necessary to follow the common [that is the universal; for common means universal]” (translated by Kirk) (“διὸ δεῖ ἐπεσθαι τῷ (ξυνῶ, τουτέστι) τῷ κοινῷ· ξυνὸς γὰρ ὁ κοινός [λόγος]”). Moreover, he continues saying: “Listen not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are One” (translated by Kirk) (“οὐκ ἐμοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφὸν ἐστὶν ἔν πάντα εἶναι”) (Kirk 1954, 57, 65). Concerning the relation between Hegel and Heraclitus see Williams (1989, 1–31, 66–86). Furthermore, Heidegger provides significant implications on Heraclitus’s onto-theological language in his lectures (Heidegger and Fink 1970, 71–83, 108–121).
- 38 For further discussion on this issue, see Hamilton (1969).
- 39 See in detail additional comments by Owens (1961, 259–304).
- 40 Hegel talks about the internal and the external in various parts of his system and in the *Phenomenology*. Such a distinction, for example, is significant in the third chapter of the *Phenomenology*, entitled “Force and the Understanding”, especially in paragraph 134 where he talks about consciousness where the “unity of being-for-self and being-for-another” is posited (1977, 80). Similarly, in paragraph 136, Hegel defines force as “the unconditioned universal which is equally in its own self what it is for another; or which contains the difference in its own self – for difference is nothing else than being-for-another” (ibid., 82).
- 41 Levinas points out that transcendence does not depend on rational presuppositions or knowing, but, in contrast, “transcendence is beyond [the

- categories of] being ... not to be an absorption in immanence ... [it] is ethics which is not, in the last analysis, the I think (which it is at first) or the unity of transcendental apperception is, as a responsibility for another, a subjection to the other” (Hand 1989, 178; *ibid.*, 92, 100).
- 42 Criticalism contends that social reactive attitudes, mental complexity (second-order volition), value in combination to autonomy, self-consciousness, communication, and (practical) reason are necessary and sufficient conditions for answering the question of what it means to be a human being (Singer 1993, 87; Harris 1985, 16–17; Tooley 1972, 82; Warren 1997, 83–84). This view was later contradicted by Chappell (2011, 1–27).
- 43 Levinas’s admiration of Greek thought is incontestable. Yet, several times he expressed his disagreement with Greek thinkers, especially with Aristotle’s and Plato’s *henology*. He contends, on the one hand, that Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology can be understood only from within the Greek tradition. On the other hand, he insists that we need to abandon the Greek *logos*. We need to create a new subjectivity, decentering the Greek subject and thereby seeking to liberate it from the Greek domination of the Same and the One; at the same time, this operation moves away from a philosophy of being that shows itself in war and which is fixed in the concept of totality dominating Western philosophy (Derrida 2001, 101–102).
- 44 Similarly, Hoffmann states that according to Hegel, “thought cannot be locked in its own realm, it must relate to its other” (1982, 4). As Hofmann also correctly puts it, “when Hegel claims that knowledge ‘knows’ not only the shadowy realm of concepts and essences, but its (natural and social) other as well – i.e., reality in all its ‘exclusivity’ and ‘externality’ – he does not just leave the matter on the level of such a general claim but points out a specific category in terms of which even the absolute knower can always identify and grasp reality as different from his conceptual scheme. This category is the category of contingency. Although contingency ... is only one aspect in the whole of actuality itself, it has no less than the rest of the forms of the idea its due office in the world of objects” (*ibid.*, 40).
- 45 Bergo correctly points out that both thinkers explore the thesis of their thought being incapable of escaping from a dualistic interiority-exteriority framework. On the one hand, “the entire history of human thought is for Hegel the history of a consciousness torn apart, opposing itself to itself, rending itself into a within and a without” (1999, 291). On the other hand, for Levinas, “the face attaches the notion of transcendence in immanence to a material object (i.e., the face) and a quotidian experience. This makes transcendence in immanence susceptible to a phenomenology of everyday experience” (*ibid.*, 295).
- 46 “Let it go” or “let it be” are terms that play a decisive role in the Hegelian dialectic of thinking (Houlgate 2008, 58, 60).

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Post-Idealism, Phenomenology, Pragmatism



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9 *Gnosis* and the *Aporetic* Notion of Truth

Heidegger and Meister Eckhart

Erik Kuravsky

Introduction

If we consider “esotericism” in its fundamental sense as a doctrine belonging to some “inner circle” (from the Greek *ἑσωτερικός*), then any highly specialised knowledge (e.g., quantum physics) could be perceived as esoteric. In everyday language, we occasionally use “esoteric” in this quasi-metaphorical sense. A more precise interpretation of the term associates esotericism with the mystical, which is etymologically linked to “concealing”, “secret”, and “initiation” (*μυστικόν, μύω*). In the introduction to *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* we read that esotericism is indeed based on mysticism and that mysticism entails *gnosis*, that is, a specific incommunicable knowledge as “a direct perception of the ultimate truth of what is” (Magee 2016, xvi). Esotericism is then founded on such *gnosis* which it implements in various esoteric techniques (ibid., xxx). Magee even presents the relation between mysticism and esotericism as a relation between *gnosis* and *techne*, a technique or art that one can use as one wishes.

We can then consider esotericism as a kind of technology distinct from the one based on empirically verifiable rules of nature but technology nonetheless. Indeed, such a definition is attractive to the contemporary mind and fits perfectly within the modern *Zeitgeist*. Hence, Magee’s definition of esotericism as a *techne* is quite felicitous. The question we need to ask, however, is whether anything that is so perfectly understood in technological terms (in the broad sense of technology as a *techne*-based way of thinking) can still be rooted in mysticism. By posing this question, I do not suggest that esotericism as such is not grounded in mystical *gnosis*, but rather, I call for a deeper analysis of the nature of such *gnosis* so that we could have a clearer account of what should be considered *genuine esotericism* (i.e., one that is based on *gnosis*) and what should be seen as a degeneration of esotericism into a quasi-mystical technology.

We do not inquire whether such a quasi-mystical technology “works”, but we do aim at delineating the *purpose* of a genuinely esoteric practice, which, according to its mystical essence, should serve (perhaps not exclusively) the goal of genuine mysticism. In this context, the popularisation of esotericism in the 20th century and the emergence of quasi-esoteric teachings can be seen as playing a role in concealing genuine esotericism, which retains its status as available only to the “inner circle.”

In this chapter, I express my conviction that Heidegger’s philosophy allows approaching the question of the mystical *gnosis* by radicalising the sense in which the *μυστικόν* is *hidden*. As I will demonstrate in the subsequent discussion, Heidegger introduces a novel perspective on the mystery of Being, defining it fundamentally by self-concealment.¹ Elliot R. Wolfson incorporates this understanding of esotericism into his interpretation of Kabbalah (Wolfson, 2019). Wolfson doesn’t assert a direct influence of Kabbalah on Heidegger, though implicit connections are not entirely implausible and can be inferred through influences like Schelling, Christian theology, and medieval mysticism, areas in which Heidegger exhibited a proficient understanding.² Instead, Heidegger’s conception of Being as self-concealing, along with the associated elements deviating significantly from the foundational principles of Western metaphysics and its inherent interpretation of logic, allows Wolfson to shed light on a deeper significance of Kabbalah. According to Wolfson, this significance tends to be obscured by the language of the original texts, which heavily relies on metaphysical notions and traditional theistic concepts used to relate to the divine in Kabbalah.³

Wolfson’s interpretation of Kabbalah serves as a compelling example of the potential role of philosophy in extracting the essence of mysticism (and, consequently, esotericism) beyond the confines established by the very linguistic means that the authors of mystical treatises initially employed. However, not every philosophy will be suitable for this purpose, and Wolfson’s deliberate choice of Heidegger underscores this point.

If philosophy is understood in its conventional sense as a rational practice directed towards propositional knowledge, it inherently contradicts the very notion of mystical *gnosis* – a direct perception of ultimate truth that transcends attainment through rational analysis and expression as conceptual knowledge. Yet, Heidegger, over more than five decades of his work, challenged this conventional view of philosophy as an essentially distorted and reduced form of thinking.

The history of Western metaphysics, starting from Plato, has inadvertently limited its perspective by interpreting the Greek *Logos* as a rationality operating solely within what is accessible to everyone at any time (the “universal”). I will elaborate on this in the next section. What is crucial for a preliminary understanding of the relationship between mysticism,

esotericism, and philosophy is that Heidegger identifies, even in the Greek origins of philosophy, an alternative path that opens up broader possibilities for philosophical thinking. This approach surpasses the artificial dichotomy of rational-irrational and allows for contemplating the essence of the mystical in ways unprecedented in the history of Western mysticism, while still aligning with some of its most significant representatives (as I shall display on the example of Meister Eckhart's mysticism).

As I shall explicate further, what Heidegger calls "ontotheology" – namely, the framework of thought that either posits the universe in terms of positive, universally accessible principles (as done in both empiricism and rationalism) or in terms of an inaccessible higher principle (as done in irrational mysticism) – assumes a specific sense of truth. This framework makes it possible to misunderstand the nature of *gnosis*, leading to its technological interpretation expressed in various forms of esoteric techniques detached from genuine mysticism (and consequently, genuine *gnosis*).

Accordingly, my objective is not to inquire whether Heidegger's philosophy aligns with any specific esoteric doctrine but rather to assert that it introduces new avenues for understanding the essence of "esoteric" and why genuine knowledge of the mystery of Being is inherently concealed yet remains accessible. In this context, "knowledge" transcends its everyday connotation of possessing something at one's disposal in a communicable manner. I will demonstrate that such esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) can only be comprehended within the framework of a redefined concept of "truth", referred to by Heidegger as the "truth of Being". Leaning on Heidegger and Meister Eckhart, I interpret this concept of truth as an *aporetic truth* distinct from the conventional *theoretic* understanding of truth. While *theoretic* truth entails a sense of presence of what is true, the *aporetic* truth is the truth of what is essentially hidden, that is, the *μυστικον*.

Seeking for the Genuine Sense of the *μυστικον* Beyond Ontotheology

From the outset of his philosophical exploration, Heidegger emphasised that the fundamental inquiry of Western metaphysics revolves around the question, "why are there beings at all rather than nothing?" (Heidegger, 1998). This query surpasses the scope of physics, which is primarily concerned with understanding the nature of the universe. Scientific investigations in physics aim to articulate general laws governing the existence and interactions of beings. While scientific pursuits may delve into the origins of the universe, they approach it as a factual occurrence devoid of an inherent "why" but simply acknowledged as existing.

The "why" question has been pivotal in demarcating the domain of metaphysics from that of mere physics throughout the history of Western

philosophy. In Plato's *Phaedo*, for instance, Socrates articulates his disinterest in natural philosophy, despite his earlier engagement with inquiries into the bodily elements facilitating thought processes and the potential role of the brain in perception and memory (Plato 1931a, 242). Plato's disappointment with natural philosophy arose because he expected too much from it. Specifically, he anticipated that Anaxagoras would not only demonstrate that the earth is round but also provide an explanation for *why* it should be so. Plato's interest lay not in a mere causal explanation of how things came to be, an explanation typically accompanied by generalisations about their qualities. Instead, he sought an understanding of the intelligible source that *necessitates* things to be the way they are. In this context, any physical law is considered contingent, and nature could, in principle, operate differently unless we comprehend the intelligibility of "nature" as such – its *idea* – and affirm that, to be what it is, nature must function in a specific manner.⁴

The same need for understanding *metaphysical* necessity underlies the question, "why are there beings at all?" This query succinctly captures Plato's intent. It goes beyond inquiring why the universe has a particular form to questioning why is there *Being* at all independently and "prior to" any concrete forms of beings. Heidegger phrases the question as "*warum überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?*" The term "*überhaupt Seiendes*" doesn't refer to specific beings. It isn't about why there are objects, space-time, or the physical universe. Instead, it seeks to understand why there is, in general, *something present* – why there is a fundamental *presencing* of Being that imparts presence to the world. The question addresses why the universe manifests itself as existent (*Seiendes*). Heidegger emphasises that, from a metaphysical perspective, the notion of "Nothing" (*Nichts*) in the question is not the opposite of beings but of the Being of beings, representing an absolute negation of their self-presencing. In essence, the fundamental metaphysical question isn't concerned with the factual existence of the universe but with the very possibility of presence, elucidating the *intelligibility of being-present* as the foundation for anything to exist at all.

Heidegger's subsequent criticism of metaphysics reveals that the "why question" guides Western philosophy and theology toward various ontotheological answers. Indeed, even much of what is traditionally classified as "mysticism" is essentially a reactionary opposition to ontotheology, and thus, still falls within the realm of ontotheology. The most distinctive feature of mysticism and esotericism, namely the belief that beyond appearances, everything is one (Magee, 2016, p. xxix), aligns with the ontotheological paradigm. The very nature of the "why question" presupposes the existence of an absolute and ultimate reason or ground (*Grund*) that establishes beings as a whole, defining the intelligibility

of this entirety, as Plato had insisted. Given that asking “what justifies/grounds the ultimate ground?” would result in an infinite regress, metaphysical grounding is posited as *self-grounding* (e.g., God as *Causa sui* or transcendental consciousness as *self-positing*). In general, ontotheological thought posits an absolute *Logos* that determines all beings (Heidegger 1988, 98). This absolute *Logos* is considered the ultimate, highest, and most essentially existing ground.

Although Heidegger doesn't explicitly develop this idea in the context of mysticism, we can observe that the distinction between ontotheological philosophy and ontotheological mysticism relates to the interpretation of the ultimate ground's self-grounding principle. In ontotheological philosophy, the ultimate ground grounds itself *necessarily* in the rationally logical sense of “necessity” intrinsic to it (for example, the god of philosophers or Kant's transcendental consciousness). In ontotheological mysticism, on the other hand, the ultimate ground grounds itself *arbitrarily*, positing itself as a ground without any rational justification (as seen in the case of the religious/mystical God).

Genuine mysticism and esotericism, however, should transcend this model altogether. They neither assume rational knowledge of the ground nor engage in irrational speculations about it. However, these are the only options within ontotheology since it determines the meaning of *truth* and of the corresponding notion of *knowledge*. Particularly, the concept of *theoria* as a positive knowledge in the sense of *pure onlooking* implies that an ultimate ground to which an ultimate knowledge pertains is, in principle, accessible to the intellect. Aristotle, for instance, employs the term “*theoria*” in this sense; it is a human ability to dwell in the awareness of everlasting beings, those which determine the ground of all that is temporary and transitory. Throughout the history of metaphysics, there exists an assumption of this (intellectual) accessibility of the ground.

This presumed availability of the ground underlies the “why question”, *even if the answer is deemed unattainable by the human mind*. In other words, the availability of the ground is not an epistemological assumption but an *ontological* one. As Heidegger occasionally suggests, the very assumption that the universe is a priori determined and, in this sense, positive, tacitly implies divine knowledge – not in a religious sense, but in the sense of the universe's inherent knowability (even if only by God). In this context, we can assert that all ontotheology (including metaphysics, theology, and even ontotheological mysticism) is fundamentally *theoretic* and, as I will emphasise later, shaped by a *theoretic* understanding of truth.

It is crucial to understand that the “why question” of metaphysics only makes sense if an ontological knowability or availability of the ground is implicitly assumed, even though it doesn't presuppose that *we* have the capacity to know it. Even ontotheological mysticism, which posits God's

arbitrary self-grounding, ultimately succumbs to the irrational nature of the ground. This entails its absolute inaccessibility to *human rationality* and, hence, appears seemingly arbitrary. The very intelligibility of the question depends on this principle of availability; hence, Heidegger asks “why the why?” (*Warum das Warum?*), meaning that the form of asking about beings as a whole reveals something about the way we tacitly assume the meaning of Being. Namely, the sentence “why *are* there beings at all” can only relate the “why” and the “are” intelligibly within a certain interpretation of “are”, that is, of the Being of beings. In short, we presuppose Being (*Sein*) as something like another “being” (*Seiende*), not necessarily in the sense of thinking it as some supreme metaphysical object but, among other things, as something “positive” and principally available.

In fact, when I mentioned that the metaphysical “why question” pertains not to specific beings but to their Being, signifying the very *self-presencing* of the universe, I was articulating the interpretation of Being prevalent since Plato. In the *Sophist* lectures, Heidegger illustrates the natural origin of this interpretation: the Greeks (and likely other cultures as well) perceived beings as either human-made or belonging to nature (*phusis*), arising on their own and accessible to human perception and action. Although the perspective on *phusis* as *emerging* into accessibility implies a pre-emerged non-availability (or concealment) – a point emphasised by Heidegger regarding the Greek understanding of nature – a particular interpretation of this emergence dominates everyday experience, skilfully scrutinised by Plato and Aristotle and further developed into Aristotle’s “logical ontology.”

This logical ontology, which remains the basis of the tacit modern assumptions of the principle of availability and knowability of Being, is related to the Greek understanding of *Logos* as a disclosive saying that occurs in discourse but constitutes the essence of human existence. That is, Aristotle’s ontology is not “logical” in the sense that it consists of propositions but in the sense that his interpretation of Being relies on the predominance of *discourse* in the Greek experience of *phusis*. In particular, in discourse, we refer to beings within the scheme of “something as something.” For example, I refer to the object outside my window, which I want to bring into the discussion, as a “tree” (moreover, even in this sentence, I already referred to it as an “object”). Yet, I can only do it if the concept of a “tree” is already intelligible and *available* to me. Accordingly, even if *phusis* emerges into what manifests as available beings, this emergence itself only makes sense to the Greek mind if that into which it emerges is, in a sense, a priori posited (e.g., as Plato’s *idea*).

While in the case of human production of objects, the idea of the priority of a product’s planned form (Aristotle’s *eidōs*) is trivial, when this idea is tacitly transposed to nature, we arrive at an interpretation of the

Being of beings as some stash of what a being can become, that is, as a potential that is quasi-present in beings and can, in principle, become fully actual and available for knowledge. The hiddenness of the universe's pre-emergent ground, that is, of the intelligibility of Being that contains the answer to the "why question", then becomes a merely relative, epistemological hiddenness.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger shows how this interpretation of Being is correlated with an understanding of the future as a not-yet-present. That is, the "hidden" is simply something that is *not yet present* (or already not present), yet its intelligibility is thought solely in terms of presence or availability (*Anwesenheit* can be translated in both ways) and, specifically, as *constant presence*. According to Heidegger, Aristotle still had some understanding of the Greek experience of *phusis* and hence did not think of presence as a static (i.e., constant) being-there of things but as a sort of continuous *movement* of "coming into presence." That is, Heidegger sees Aristotle's analysis of movement not as an analysis of moving things but as addressing the Being of beings in terms of their *dynamis* and *energia* (Heidegger 1995, 44). This Aristotelian view of *phusis* as not *entirely* present still echoes Heraclitus' words that "the essence of things likes to hide itself" (Heidegger 2018, 91).

Gathering together and thinking through the pre-Socratic and post-Socratic hints on the emerging nature of *phusis*, Heidegger stresses that "coming into presence" assumes a radically un-presentable side of *phusis* in an ontological sense of concealment, which we still hear in the Greek term for "truth" – *aletheia*, unconcealment. As Heidegger writes in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*: "*Phusis* is the event of *standing forth*, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time" (Heidegger 2014, 16).

In what sense does the concealed "take a stand"? Since the concealed does not present itself, it is precisely the "nothing" which we also encounter in the "why question." However, while the metaphysical "why question" assumes a dichotomy of presence vs. nothing, in the happening of the standing forth of *phusis*, we find the strange co-belongingness of the concealed and the unconcealed as entailing and supporting each other within a single event of *phusis*' self-emergence. Imagining that the unconcealed is separable from the concealed is to remain within the interpretation of Being as presence: either the concealed is temporarily hidden (but still quasi-present) in some other realm, or the unconcealed emerges *ex nihilo*. In the event of *phusis*' self-emergence, on the contrary, the concealed appears *as concealed* "within" the unconcealed, co-constituting its presence but not being itself present.

At this point, we can observe the crucial distinction between Heidegger's notion of *Beyng* (spelled with a "y" to differentiate it from metaphysical

Being as sheer presence) and the ontological demands/presuppositions of technological thinking. In this perspective, entities – whether material, super-sensible, or psychic – are considered real in the sense that they are fully present (even if not seen) and can be *manipulated* through the application of an appropriate *techne*, that is, technique. Heidegger's late criticism of technology pertains to this aspect of ontotheology; it is not a critique of technological machinery but rather of a historically predominant interpretation of reality and knowledge in terms of *techne* – an interpretation that is only viable if the universe is reducible to what is, or can be, present.

Within this understanding, both empirical science and esoteric techniques are deemed true and knowledge-founding if they *produce predictable, calculable results*. Whether such knowledge is respected by the masses (science) or only by a smaller group (esotericism) makes no difference; both are equally technological, rejecting a priori the *μυστικόν*, at least in the genuinely ontological sense found in Heidegger's idea of Being's self-concealment. If there is indeed something akin to genuine, mysticism-based, non-ontotheological esotericism, it should be rooted, *at least in its most essential character*, in a *gnosis* that embraces a radically different form of knowledge and truth. This *gnosis* stands in stark opposition to the utilitarian nature of technological knowledge, which is geared towards achieving predetermined (i.e., predictable/calculable) objectives.

The Mystery's Relation to Human Beings

Let us return to Heidegger's notion of concealment. We encounter concealment within the unconcealed in various ways, some of which are crucial for grasping the inherent esotericism of the knowledge of Being. We shall address this point later. Yet, Heidegger stresses that the most common cases of self-concealment pertain to *all* the things around us. Specifically, what we call the materiality of a thing, such as the rock's blunt heaviness and hardness, remains forever impenetrable no matter how much we measure them and try to reduce these qualities to the representations of modern physics (Heidegger 2002, 25). Smashing the rock, says Heidegger, shows us its pieces but never anything *inward*, anything that has been opened up. Similarly, "the colour shines and wants only to shine. If we try to make it comprehensible by analysing it into numbers of oscillations, it is gone" (ibid.).

What undercover idealists of modern analytic philosophy call "qualia" belongs to the things in the world but requires an event of *unconcealment* in which human Dasein participates.⁵ However, even thus unconcealed and manifest, the thingness of the thing remains something withdrawn and self-enclosed. Heidegger calls this aspect of Being "the earth" and argues that "earth shatters every attempt to penetrate it" (Ibid.). That is,

“the earth is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and preserved as the essentially undisclosable, as that which withdraws from every disclosure, in other words, keeps itself constantly closed up” (ibid.).

The undisclosableness of the earth is not a contingent fact but a condition for there being – that is, manifesting/presencing – anything at all. The self-concealment of the earth thus does not answer the “why question” but contributes to the understanding of the intelligibility of beings as such, that is, to the *how* of the universe’s presence. Following Plato’s intention, we begin to realise the meaning of Being of the universe and thus can start making sense of the necessary way it manifests. I cannot address in detail here the question of how the impenetrability of the earth (including the concrete experienceable qualities of things) contributes to the very possibility of there being a world at all. This would, by itself, be a *mystical* explanation because it is an explanation that contributes to the understanding of the role of the *hidden* (*μυστικόν*) in what shows itself in the world. However, for such an explanation, if it can still be labelled as such, a more profound comprehension of concealment and truth is indispensable. Equally crucial is the connection between the overarching mystical nature of the universe and the specifically mystical *gnosis*, especially in how it relates to our own human essence.

Though the self-concealing of the things’ “material” qualities is the most immediately graspable manifestation of the self-concealment of Being, its most ontologically important consequence is that *the meaning of truth must be rethought*. The essence and the possibilities of all (true) knowledge are dependent on the essence of truth as such. While for metaphysics Being equals presence, truth is nothing but the principal givenness of this presence of beings. I called earlier such notion of truth “*theoretic* truth.” Within such *theoretic* (not to confuse with “theoretical”) conception, human knowing ability is determined as an ability to receive the self-givenness of truth (even if it might sometimes be extremely hard). However, if Being is a happening determined by self-concealment and truth is the unconcealment of this happening, in the very heart of truth, there is a *mystery*: “not a particular mystery regarding this or that, but rather the one mystery – that, in general, mystery (the concealing of what is concealed) as such holds sway throughout the *Da-sein* of human beings” (Heidegger 1998, 148).

Let us consider Heidegger’s assertion from “On the Essence of Truth” that in the heart of truth, a mystery (the concealing of what is concealed) as such *pervades throughout the Da-sein of human beings*. In the preceding section, we observed that the hiddenness/concealedness of the universe (i.e., of its Being) is not epistemologically determined as something beyond our means of knowing, but ontologically as that which *withdraws* and *conceals* itself (for instance, as the impenetrability of the manifest

qualities of things). Additionally, the concealed “side” is not tucked away in some separate realm but co-constitutes everything we encounter in the world. What we should now acknowledge is that the mystery of Being’s self-concealment is not something that occurs *independently* of Dasein’s existence, as if humans stood outside it on a brightly illuminated ground of reason and merely observed the withdrawal of Being “from aside.”

The relationship of human beings to the enigma of Being is neither theoretical nor even epistemic in the conventional sense of the word. Wolfson explicitly embraces Heidegger’s understanding of the relation to the nothingness (i.e., the self-concealment) of Being when he characterises the Kabbalistic notion of *Ein Sof* as follows:

Not known intellectually by way of deductive inference, or perceptually by way of direct experience, or even intuitively by way of imagistic exemplification, but rather through an encounter with the nothingness that permeates all beings as the being that withdraws from all beings, an encounter that ignites the terror of nonbeing in confronting the unavoidable void of being, the emptiness of the nonemptiness that is the nucleus of all subsistence.

(Wolfson 2019, 115)

Indeed, Wolfson is able to establish strong connections between Heidegger’s self-concealing Beyng and the *Ein Sof* precisely due to the esoteric character of Beyng, not merely concealed but also encountered by human beings *as an enigma pertaining to their own existence*.

The mystery of Being can never be encapsulated in the form of a doctrine but is only apprehended as the Nothingness that, initially, must shatter the very foundation of our capacity to make sense of anything at all. Heidegger often refers to this encounter as anxiety (*Angst*), emphasising in *Being and Time* that our daily, “normal” mode of existence is shaped by evading anxiety and, consequently, evading the experience of the Nothingness that would open our eyes to the significance of Being. Consequently, the seal on the “esoteric knowledge” of Beyng is not guarded by an exclusive circle of adepts but by our own evasion of existential anxiety; the seal of the mystery belongs to the “erring” mode of human existence. As Heidegger expresses it, “the human being’s flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, moving from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by – this is *erring*” (Heidegger 1998, 150).

The mystery of Being becomes concealed in the sense that we do not perceive that there is concealment at all; we are oblivious to the mystery that encompasses everything that exists. Indeed, we cannot even comprehend such a mystery and are strongly compelled by inner forces, of which we are largely unaware, to steer clear of the mystery. What Heidegger

consistently terms the forgetfulness and the oblivion of Being is nothing more than our self-defensive avoidance of the mystery.

Importantly, this avoidance of the mystery is primarily self-avoidance, as the role of Dasein in the self-gathering of beings implies that human selfhood is not something that “can be attained immediately by representing the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ and their situation” (Heidegger 2012a, 54). Viewing the self as something *given* echoes the interpretation of Being as available and present. However, human selfhood is not an entity but an element of the strife between Being’s concealment and unconcealment – a “between” that both manifests in the light of a particularly manifesting Being and determines this manifestation. The embeddedness of humanity in the (quasi) cosmic drama establishes a connection between Heidegger’s thinking and various mystical and esoteric traditions. Consider, for example, Plato’s assertion in *Gorgias*, significant for subsequent neo-platonic mysticism, that temperance and justice unite heaven and earth. Similarly, Meister Eckhart’s idea that without holy men, God could not be God, and the notion of strife between ground and existence in Schelling, whose thinking is notably influenced by Jacob Boehme, further illustrate this connection.

Indeed, we can readily discern how at least two of the main features of esotericism, as listed by Magee, are essential to Heidegger’s conception of humanity’s embeddedness in the event of Being’s revelation. Primarily, I refer to the notion of “correspondence” underlying the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm (Magee 2016, xxi). In Heidegger’s philosophy, however, this is not a mere ontic correspondence between two entities or existing orders of things; instead, it pertains to the correspondence between human existence and the essential occurrence of Being.

In other words, what I have previously characterised as “erring” – denying the mystery and experiencing the world through ontotheological and technological lenses – *corresponds to a corrupted state of Being itself*. It is a mode in which the truth of Being is not manifest in beings. This is not a matter of simply misperceiving the world; rather, the world itself conceals its true nature and denies its mystery to us. Heidegger articulates this in “The Question Concerning Technology” when discussing “Enframing” as the mode of an exclusively technological understanding of Being: “Thus the challenging Enframing not only conceals a former way of revealing, bringing-forth, but it conceals revealing itself and with it That wherein unconcealment, i.e., truth, comes to pass” (Heidegger 1982b, 27).

What comes to pass is the clearing of Being itself. While, under “normal circumstances”, Being both reveals and conceals itself, in our corrupted technological era, it conceals its own concealment, presenting itself as if there were only revealing. In this way, the very possibility for truth to

manifest in the world, what Heidegger calls “revealing itself”, is concealed. The world *itself* becomes “disenchanted”.

Consequently, transcending the erring mode of existence brings about a transformation in the world, allowing beings to manifest as they should, explicitly infused with the mystery of Being. In this state, beings may even appear as divine signs (Heidegger 2017, 104). This aligns with another characteristic of esotericism termed by Magee as the “experience of transmutation”, which esotericism metaphorically represents as an alchemic transmutation of both the world and the self.

However, just as the preceding discussion led us to reconsider the concept of *gnosis* and its truth outside the traditionally technological terms that underpin the verifiability of knowledge through planning and achieving results, our brief analysis of human existence embedded in the *μυστικόν* (i.e., the self-concealment of Beyng) encounters a similar necessity. If the transformation of ourselves and the world is deemed achievable through the application of a certain technique based on the presumed a priori structure of the universe, we remain within the technological paradigm. In doing so, we risk fabricating a false *μυστικόν*, which enables us to successfully evade anxiety but obscures the genuine meaning of the mystical *gnosis* upon which authentic esotericism should be founded.

Attaining the Truth of the *μυστικόν*: A Detour Through Meister Eckhart

In the 1940s, Heidegger presented the core issue that determined a technological interpretation of Being, one that seized the mystery of its self-concealment and presented the universe as fully available to satisfy human subjective needs – whether through scientific or “occult” techniques – as the problem of will. Specifically, he interpreted Nietzsche’s notion of the will-to-power as expressing the essence of subjective, representational will, which set aims based on its own pursuit of dominance. Importantly, this “dominance” should not be reduced to the malicious use of the world (or even of other human beings) but encompassed “dominance over oneself” as well. This involved striving for self-transformation, self-fulfillment, and even self-transcendence, *achieved by relying on one’s own resources and faculties*. This assumption is readily apparent in the prevalent Western approach to psychological well-being and spirituality, exemplified by the appropriation of Eastern meditative practices (e.g., mindfulness meditation) for cognitive and emotional self-improvement.⁶

While Heidegger also discusses the need for transformation, even advocating for a *leap* and a radical *dislodgement* (*Verrückung*) of human essence, he emphasises that undertaking such a dislodgement by relying on

our own resources is even more presumptuous than viewing human beings as a “measure” of Being (Heidegger 2012a, 22).⁷

The presumptuousness of the will-to-power aligns closely with the technological understanding of Being and the *theoretic* conception of knowledge discussed earlier. Specifically, it presupposes that the desired transformation’s objective can be explicitly known, presenting a state predetermined by a fundamentally available ground of human essence. In simpler terms, the concept of “self” in self-transformation is predefined and posited as something that can, for instance, be wiped clean, akin to the famous Zen story of turning a dirty mirror into a perfectly clear one. Contrary to this self-positing view of will, Heidegger proposes an alternative perspective of letting-be, or releasement (*Gelassenheit*), emphasising its existence “entirely outside the domain of will” (Heidegger 2016b, 70).⁸

I have explored elsewhere the justifiability of such a radical distinction between will and releasement, along with the ethical implications it carries.⁹ In this context, I propose an alternative approach aiming to unpack the notion of releasement in a way that elucidates the concepts of knowledge (i.e., *gnosis*) and truth corresponding to the transcendence of the will assumed in ontotheology, and consequently, in all ontotheological sciences, and “esoteric” techniques. This perspective will provide a framework for distinguishing the inherently mystical and esoteric attributes of anything that might be uncritically labelled with these terms. To adopt this approach, we must extend our exploration beyond Heidegger and turn our attention to the mystic who significantly influenced Heidegger’s thinking and from whom he borrowed the term “releasement” (*Gelassenheit*) – Meister Eckhart.

While Meister Eckhart held a significant position in the Catholic Church, his perspectives are recognised as mystical and, in many respects, divergent – if not entirely contradictory – from traditional Christian views. Of particular interest to us is his emphasis on knowledge, surpassing even the importance of faith, though he never dismisses the significance of the latter. This inclination towards knowledge can be perceived as a gnostic element in Eckhart, reflective of the broader Catholic tradition.

Eckhart speaks of the imperative to attain the highest truth, a goal obstructed when our intentions are “according to time and tide, before and after.” In other words, engaging in a calculated, prudent relationship with God, illustrated by Eckhart through the story of Jesus casting out those buying and selling at the temple, hinders the realisation of this highest truth (Eckhart 2010, 66). Importantly, there is nothing morally objectionable in such an attitude; Eckhart emphasises that the merchants are “all good people.” Nevertheless, their approach does not align with the highest truth of God, who acts with perfect freedom “without a why.” Eckhart’s concept of releasement provides an alternative to this mindset, expressing

not only a potential human state of existence but also characterising God himself.

The parallel to Heidegger is evident: the calculating, technological attitude of ontotheology contrasts with releasement and the concept of “being without a why” (a phrase explicitly used by Heidegger in his later philosophy). Interestingly, Eckhart frequently refers to the expression “without a why” primarily in relation to truth, specifically in the pursuit of truth. Seeking God and truth is undertaken without any explicit reason. In one of Eckhart’s sermons, he articulates this perspective: “Ask a good man, ‘Why do you seek God?’ and he will answer, ‘Because He is God.’ – ‘Why do you seek truth?’ – ‘Because it is truth’” (ibid., 96). Even more intriguing is another quote from the same sermon: “The truth is such a noble thing that if God were able to turn away from truth, I would cling to truth and let God go.”

If this truth were solely the truth of faith rather than knowledge, the citation would hold little value for us. However, Eckhart consistently emphasises a specific kind of knowledge that transcends all images and anything that can be learned and taught (I would add “theoretically”). It is this knowledge that corresponds to the highest truth, to which even the notion of “God” is of secondary importance. As Eckhart puts it in another sermon:

Now observe how great the use is! For all the truth learned by all the masters by their own intellect and understanding, or ever to be learned till Doomsday, they never had the slightest inkling of this knowledge and this ground. Though it may be called a nescience, an unknowing, yet there is in it more than in all knowing and understanding without it, for this unknowing lures and attracts you from all understood things, and from yourself as well.

(ibid., 36)

To convey the non-representational nature of this form of knowledge, Eckhart refers to it as unknowing (or nescience). However, he doesn’t mean something akin to ignorance or a mere absence of conventional knowledge. Instead, he elucidates that “unknowing” is a *transformed* knowing, originating from conventional knowledge and evolving through this transformation into a supernatural knowing (Ibid., 43). Therefore, we can assert that while regular (*theoretic*) knowledge is essential to initiate one’s journey toward the highest truth, this knowledge serves merely as a preliminary preparation for a different kind of knowledge, one that we can comfortably acknowledge as mystical *gnosis*.

The two, however, cannot be entirely separable, as it becomes evident that not every form of knowledge can undergo transformation into unknowing. In fact, as I will elaborate further, what undergoes transformation is not even a specific knowledge but rather *knowing itself*, liberated for its inherently mystical element, for which certain types of *theoretic* knowledge – when interpreted in terms of seeking this element – can pave the way.

Still, at this stage, we cannot grasp the nature of this knowing or even its difference from *theoretic* knowing unless we understand the nature of that highest truth to which it propels the mystic. The two are inseparable – *gnosis* is the (un)knowing of the highest truth, while the highest truth determines the *gnostic* nature of (un)knowing. While this may seem like a circle impenetrable for theoretical analysis, thanks to Heidegger, we have a rich account of the ways in which thinking can surpass such analysis to provide us with some hints of a more original meaning of the truth of the *μυστικον*, one that can echo Eckhart's insights in a more subtle and self-reflective language. I remind that in the previous two sections, we witnessed the need for a novel understanding of truth to which a mystery essentially belongs. Only such a notion of truth will allow a sense of *gnosis* and a *gnosis*-based esoteric practice that does not fall into the technological framework of ontotheology.

However, before we return to Heidegger, we need to pick up a thread in Eckhart's mysticism that would allow us the correct re-entrance, one that binds Heidegger's idea of the self-concealment of *Beyng* to his notion of the *truth of Beyng* in a way that illuminates how this truth relates to the mystical *gnosis*. Since, as Eckhart says, unknowing is a *transformation* of knowing, by clarifying the sense of this transformation, we will also clarify how to apply Heidegger's thinking to the problem of *gnosis* as (un)knowing and truth.

In one of his most enigmatic sermons, Eckhart speaks of the meaning of being "poor in spirit" as entailing a transformation directly linked to the attainment of the highest truth. While Eckhart describes this transformation in three consequential stages, the first two stages of becoming free from will and from knowledge are so interrelated that they should be considered more or less simultaneous. Hence, let us first address being poor in knowledge.

According to Eckhart, to be poor in spirit, one must become "poor of all his own knowledge: not knowing any *thing*, not God, nor creature nor himself. For this, it is necessary that a man should desire to know and understand nothing of the works of God" (Ibid., 423). Remembering that Eckhart rejects unknowing in the sense of simple ignorance and noticing his emphasis on "thing" in the quoted passage, as well as his mention of one's own knowledge, we can interpret this aspect of being poor in spirit as

a detachment from the subjective representational knowledge of the things in this world. Christ's expulsion of the merchants from the temple of God aligns with this rejection of calculative, worldly knowledge. It is essential to note that this rejection doesn't vehemently demonise the world, as seen in some Gnostic teachings, but rather acknowledges that such ontic knowledge (similar to Heidegger's technological knowledge) cannot, on its own, lead to the highest truth. While one should not forget practical knowledge, such as tying one's shoes or doing some mental exercises, one should avoid deluding oneself that this type of understanding is relevant for attaining the highest truth.

This interpretation finds support in another sermon where Eckhart addresses the question of how one can be empty of all images. Eckhart emphasises the need for a special kind of understanding, stating, "so as to comprehend within my own mind all the images ever conceived by all men, as well as those that exist in God Himself", and to possess it *without attachment* to these images (Ibid., 77). In such a detached understanding, one is "untrammelled by any images, just as I was when I was not."

The second element (as presented by Eckhart, considered first) involves becoming free from one's will, even from the will to serve God or seek eternity. This aspect also correlates with the earlier idea of "being as when I was not." Here, Eckhart explicitly discusses a "created will" that directs itself towards anything created (beings) or shaped by an interpretation of God as a creator, from whom one is separate (as a creature) and to whom one must submit their will. We can interpret this element in harmony with the preceding one – detachment should extend not only from any ontic wishes (we might add: "attainable by some technique") but also from the very technological conception of God *as a creator*.

Finally, the most radical element, viewed by Eckhart as the purest form of poverty, entails *having* nothing in the sense that one not only becomes an empty vessel for God to fill but is even devoid of this emptiness: "for poverty of spirit means being so free of God and all His works, that God, if He wishes to work in the soul, is *Himself* the place where He works – and this He gladly does" (Ibid., 423). In this context, Eckhart asserts that God becomes one with the soul. In this exemplary case of *unio mystica*, it is crucial to note that both God and the soul are radically nullified, existing as one precisely in the nameless nothingness of the Godhead, beyond any specifically Christian attributes. Indeed, all three elements of being poor in spirit should be understood in the context of Eckhart's recurring idea that detachment (from everything created and even from the creator) leads to a state of pure nothingness. The term "releasement" then denotes the positive nature of this detachment, signifying not merely a rejection but an attainment of the highest truth.

Truth of Beyng as the *Aporetic* Truth of the *μυστικον*

Our exploration of releasement through a detour into Eckhart's mysticism reveals that the highest truth of the *μυστικον* is characterised by a distinctive negation of willing, knowing, and (subjective) existence. All three are negated in a manner that doesn't transform the poor in spirit into an apathetic, ignorant, or bluntly non-existent entity. The final element of the state of pure nothingness, namely having nothing in the sense of not existing as a subject "in whom" the work of God could be done, is, as Eckhart confirms, the most straightforward description of the transformation that involves a kind of (un)knowing and truth different from what I earlier explicated in terms of the *theoretic* truth of ontotheology.

Such a state of being nothing, according to Eckhart, is a state of *living without a why* (Ibid., 110). Heidegger also employs this expression when referring to a state of human existence surpassing representational thinking rooted in the "why question" we explored earlier. However, Heidegger himself has not explicitly connected this idea to either releasement or the truth of Beyng. Yet, this is precisely the direction hinted at by Meister Eckhart. Consequently, in this final section, we shall provide a brief interpretation of Heidegger's notion of the truth of Beyng, which he "defines" as the "openness of the self-concealing" that needs to be sheltered/grounded by Dasein (Heidegger 2012a, 23).

In "The Principle of Reason", Heidegger interprets the notion of "being without a why" as expressing a mode of being that is not groundless in the sense of being arbitrary or irrational. Instead, it is rooted so profoundly in its ground (in its "because") that no representational relation or inquiry toward this ground is demanded. The "why question" discussed earlier represents such a representational relation. Consequently, I propose that being "without a why" surpasses the mode of ontotheological understanding of Being and relates to the truth of Beyng's self-concealment, that is, to the truth of Beyng.

Crucially, "to be without a why" is not an arbitrary self-restriction but – in case of human beings – a *knowing* acknowledgement of the distortive nature of asking the "why question", stemming from the inadequacy of representational relation to Beyng. As both Eckhart and Heidegger demonstrate, being "without a why" is not a state of apathetic ignorance but a mode of dwelling in the highest truth equivalent to dwelling in nothing. Nevertheless, Heidegger consistently critiques the essential *questionlessness* of the modern age and refers to genuine questioners as those who "place the new and highest degree of steadfastness in the middle of beyng" (ibid., 12). Yet, how can we exist "without a why" *and* be genuine questioners of Being?

The answer is only possible in terms of an alternative understanding of truth and a transformed notion of “questioning” that can be related to the genuinely mystical sense of *gnosis*. First and foremost, we must shift away from any image of Being as a “something” positive that can “provide answers about itself” in the sense of representational knowledge. Instead, we should recognise that the truth of Beyng appears primarily *as a call*. The antecedent to this idea is found in the previously quoted passage from Meister Eckhart, stating that “unknowing lures and attracts you from all understood things, and from yourself as well.” Heidegger similarly suggests that the truth of Beyng “lures” us – the call of Being is a call of the *truth* of Being itself (Heidegger 2012a, 42).

The mystery of truth lies in its inability to be conceptualised in terms of available or unavailable structures of the world; rather, it can only be *experienced as the call of Beyng*. This is the attraction of the self-negating and never fully present happening of the Event of Beyng, to which we, as human beings, belong. Its unfolding is determined by the “between” position of Dasein, comprising both the non-human, anxiety-bearing departure of Beyng from anything comprehensible and concretely experienceable, and our own existential self-positing in relation to this mystery. Human selfhood itself is the site of the call and belonging to Beyng (Ibid.). To recognise the call is to understand it – that is, to comprehend what is required from one’s existence to transform into the truth of the call.

The call attunes us to the “why question” in a novel manner – why are there beings at all rather than nothing? This is not a metaphysical inquiry that could be resolved with a specific “because”; instead, it embodies an all-encompassing distress that cannot be reduced to propositional or definitive knowledge. The called one doesn’t seek answers but rather longs for a *profound self-integration into the question*. The question transforms into a creative meditation not driven by an intention to uncover what already exists (a priori available essence of beings) but by a liberating desire to remain close to the truth of Beyng *manifesting as the seeking/longing itself*. The goal, as Heidegger puts it, “is seeking itself, the seeking after beyng. Such seeking occurs and is itself the deepest discovery when humans decisively become preservers of the truth of beyng, stewards of that stillness” (Heidegger 2012a, 16).

Through a deeper immersion in the question of Being, we unveil that Beyng itself takes on a “questioning form”, questioning *us* instead of the other way around. However, this “questioning” is not external, as if we were still “subjects” in which God’s works could be done. Instead, it occurs in a way that surpasses the theoretically numeric differentiation between the knower and the known, the questioned and the question. Heidegger calls this mode of existence “inceptual questioning”; one is appropriated by the self-concealing question-nature of the mystery of Beyng and explicitly

sustains the difference intrinsic to Beyng itself (i.e., between its mystery and the factual availability/presence of beings) (Heidegger 2012b, 205).

The conventional ontotheological perspective places emphasis on the answer over the question, assuming the existence of an answer even before recognising the presence of a question. Within this framework, we project an idea of the answer upon which the intelligibility of the question depends, interpreting mystery within the confines of the “esoteric” nature of such an answer. At best, within this conventional paradigm, we can conceive of an absolute mystery that *lacks* a definite answer. However, this understanding still adheres to the traditional concept of “truth” by presupposing the idea of a lacking answer, thereby determining the traditionally negative character of mysticism.

True mysticism, however, is not characterised by a lack of an answer; rather, it embodies the abyssal self-concealment of Beyng, and its groundlessness is more accurately understood not through a Greek notion of *theoria* (against which we realise a lack) but through the concept of *aporia*, which expresses the double meaning of the Greek term *απορία* as both a question (Heidegger) and poverty (Eckhart).

Heidegger’s insights aid in conceiving an *aporetic* notion of truth as a knowing awareness of the call of Beyng that doesn’t lead one to a specific answer (or to a lack thereof) but to an appropriation within an already unfolding mystery as the mystery itself. Such *aporetic* truth is the experience of the withdrawal of Being *as a gift*. Specifically, it involves a transformation of the fundamental structure of one’s selfhood from one that represents grounds (*theoria*) to one that is “poor in spirit” (*aporia*), and thus has no place for itself but in the very Event of Beyng’s self-grounding that occurs without a why.

Genuine *gnosis* is *aporetic*, characterised by “inner” certitude that one is being-questioned and guided by the truth of Beyng.¹⁰ What one “knows” is the direction of the movement to which one experientially discovers one’s belonging and the feeling of its never-ending mystery. The recognition of the movement and its value is direct yet different from the Cartesian certitude of “I think” in that it is a certitude of one’s self-appropriation, never possessing a final point of subjective (or objective) reference, yet witnessing the unquestionable self-belongingness to the nothingness of that which thus questions and calls me.

Concluding Thoughts – *Gnosis* and Genuine Esotericism

Hans Jonas writes that, in general, *gnosis* is the knowledge of the naturally unknowable (Jonas 2001, 34), which can be seen both as a means for attaining salvation and even as salvation itself (Ibid., 32). Our interpretation encompasses all of these elements within an *aporetic* notion of truth

akin to Heidegger's truth of Beyng and Eckhart's highest truth beyond all representational knowledge.

It is crucial to note that while this interpretation of *gnosis* as a mode of (un)knowing existence might constitute the *essence* of genuine mysticism and esotericism, it does not exhaust their possibilities. Other forms of knowledge and practices (rather than "techniques") might be central to an esoteric doctrine. What is crucial is whether the knowledge and practices aim at *gnosis* or, more accurately, at one's preparation for hearing its call and overcoming psychological, physical, and other obstacles that not only prevent such hearing but actively tranquilise one's existence.¹¹

Rather than categorising entire esoteric doctrines as genuine or non-genuine (e.g., as "technological"), what is crucial is understanding how their concrete manifestations (e.g., as esoteric schools) interpret the meaning of their practices. Genuine esotericism's interpretation of itself is essentially determined by *gnosis*. For example, astrology might have no relation to *gnosis* but be nothing more than a technique, a *theoretic* knowledge of planetary influences. This is why some gnostic doctrines dismiss astrology as another form of worldly knowledge. However, such knowledge can also be appropriated as a means to anticipate obstacles on the way to salvation/*gnosis* and to clarify one's path to liberation, as is done in Gurdjieff's "fourth way."¹² On the other hand, a seemingly esoteric knowledge of reincarnation is deemed by Gurdjieff as useless or even dangerous since it does not facilitate the sense of urgency needed for taking the esoteric task of awakening seriously enough. In this context, a purely academic study of esotericism might itself be a form of "anti-*gnosis*", debating various doctrines as if one's own existence (as well as that of one's future readers) was not at issue. Such debates are purely *theoretic*, yet they can also be interpreted (and intended) not as "purely academic" but as using the academic platform for sheltering the truth of esotericism and allowing others to hear its call.

Notes

- 1 Elsewhere I argue that Heidegger makes possible to interpret mystical experience not as anomaly but as illuminating the real nature of experience as such. See Kuravsky 2023c.
- 2 "It goes without saying that Heidegger does not unconditionally accept the apophatic discourse well attested in the history of Christian mysticism, but he does, in my judgment, elicit from these sources a more radical, and perhaps esoteric, perspective to fabricate his own idea of Seyn" Wolfson (2019, 104).
- 3 "Medieval kabbalists did not have the language to communicate this idea adequately, and unfortunately, in the course of time even *Ein Sof* was calcified linguistically, as we see, for example, in the expression *ein sof baruch hu*,

- the infinite, blessed be he, a turn of phrase that translates the nontheistic – or maybe atheistic – notion back into a theistic index” Wolfson (2019, 110).
- 4 Later rationalists vulgarised this idea. For example, Spinoza argues that it is sufficient for his aims to analyse the idea of nature, its essence, rather than sporadically studying its many factual laws. Yet, Spinoza’s idea of nature is nothing but an empty, formal characterisation of nature as an infinite wholeness (see Spinoza (1954, p. 27)).
 - 5 For a detailed analysis of Heidegger’s notion of Dasein as surpassing any anthropomorphism and subjectivism by decentralising human essence from its traditionally “human” interpretation (i.e., as rational animal, and as, in general, something separable from the “process” of Being’s self-manifestation) see Chapter 3 in Kuravsky 2023a. In short, it is crucial to understand that Dasein is not synonymous with an individual human being or even the entirety of humanity. Nor is it some general human essence. What Heidegger refers to as “Dasein” characterises *Being* in a manner that is pertinent to the novel understanding of Being as irreducible to a single sense of presence and always concealing other possible modes. Being is Dasein-ish; it provides a unique “there” for beings themselves beyond and above their general characteristics. As articulated by Heidegger in his 1931 lectures, asserting that beings are gathered in Dasein is tantamount to affirming that beings are gathered in one (Heidegger 1995, 109). To be human is to *participate* in this gathering.
 - 6 I have written a distinct essay addressing the critique of the technological Westernisation of mindfulness and exploring the Heideggerian principles to unlock its innate existential and spiritual potential for freedom from suffering. See Kuravsky 2023d.
 - 7 For an examination of Heidegger’s notion of “dislodgement” and its relation to transformation beyond ontotheological reason see Kuravsky 2022a.
 - 8 For the most extensive treatment of the problem of will in Heidegger, see Davis 2007.
 - 9 See. Kuravsky 2023e.
 - 10 If this sounds dangerously close to schizophrenia there are good reasons for this as at least some forms of insanity might be nothing but a heroic failure to follow the call of Being (think, for example, of Nietzsche and Hölderlin). See Kuravsky 2023b.
 - 11 The transformation of a regular representational mode of attention into the subtle noticing of what transcends present beings and calls us is a shift in one’s mode of attention. For the role of a specifically ontological mode of attention in such a preparation for *gnosis*. See Kuravsky 2022b.
 - 12 See Collin, 1984.

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10 Cosmic Harmony and an Unseen Order

On Mysticism, Panpsychism, and Philosophical Temperaments in William James

Sami Pihlström

Introduction

William James (1842–1910), one of the founders of the pragmatist tradition and a pioneer of modern psychology, is also a classical figure in the philosophy of religion and (more broadly) interdisciplinary religious studies – as well as one of the relatively few philosophers in the modern Western canon who explicitly addressed mysticism and spirituality as core topics in their work.¹ This chapter will critically consider James’s relation to esoteric and mystical philosophy by taking a look at, among other things, his explorations of religious mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and other late writings – in the context of his lifelong concern with the pragmatic justifiability of religious faith – and his (related) deep interest in panpsychism, the view that reality is fundamentally psychical or experiential. James’s relatively few references to esoteric writers in his major works also need to be briefly considered. However, for philosophers leaning towards esotericism it may be a disappointment to perceive that even James, while being perhaps *the* figure manifesting most sympathy towards esoteric and mystical ideas among major classics of twentieth-century Western philosophy, cannot be claimed to have had any close interest in esotericism despite his mysticist and panpsychist tendencies.²

James *could*, perhaps, have been a philosophically “respectable” esoteric thinker – but in the end, he wasn’t, simply because he was *not* really an esoteric thinker at all. His not belonging to the esoteric tradition is confirmed by the fact that his name occurs only three times, always only in passing, in a definitive collection of articles on Western esotericism (Magee 2016). Accordingly, the purpose of my discussion is not to suggest that James was a closet esotericist. I see no reason, either philosophical or historical, for such speculation.

However, it is of philosophical interest to examine some specific ideas (or “moments”, as I will call them) in James’s philosophy also addressing the relation between traditional academic philosophy and esoteric mysticism. Doing so will lead us to discuss the main tensions that troubled James’s philosophy and to a meta-level investigation of the significance of what James called “philosophical temperaments”. Some interpreters, most prominently Richard Gale (1999), have suggested that there is a deep tension between James’s pragmatist and mystical tendencies – to the extent that Gale speaks about the “divided self” of James (see also Myers 1986, 461–480, especially 466). Such readings of James may be critically evaluated by reconsidering what “pragmatic” (in a broad sense) can be taken to mean in James. An individual’s openness to the possibility of mystical experience in religious contexts could – in individual cases – be understood as a pragmatic way of engaging with reality. James, however, approached mysticism as a scholar and an empirical researcher, never succumbing to the temptations of full-blown mysticism, while emphasizing its significance in the study of religious experience. James undoubtedly had his own (both philosophical and religious) “demons” to fight with in dealing with these tensions, and it is not inconceivable that in some possible world his struggle could have turned towards an overall account more favourable to esotericism.³

A Word on the Historical Background

Historically and biographically, the background influences of William James most relevant to his later mysticist, panpsychist, and possibly esoteric “moments” are American transcendentalism (Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau)⁴ as well as, perhaps even more importantly in the context of esotericism, the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. James’s father, Henry James, Sr., has been described as a “Swedenborgian” with some qualifications (though he was influenced by many other religious and mystical thinkers as well), and the James family – not only William but also his equally famous brother Henry James, Jr., the novelist – was thus exposed to Swedenborgian influences early on.⁵ Henry Sr. was a religious mystic, and this could not have failed to make a profound impact on William, though the latter maintained a critical distance to his father’s thinking.

William James’s famous biographer Ralph Barton Perry observes that Henry Sr. was not converted by reading Swedenborg but that this reading “confirmed and sustained him, giving him a language, a systematic framework, and support for the faith that was in him” (Perry 1964, 7). Henry Sr. reported a kind of religious revelation upon reading Swedenborg in 1846:

My heart divined, even before my intelligence was prepared to do justice to the books, the unequalled amount of truth to be found in them. ... Imagine a subject of some petty despotism condemned to die, and with (what is more and worse) a sentiment of death pervading all his consciousness, lifted by a sudden miracle into felt harmony with universal man, and filled to the brim with the sentiment of indestructible life instead; and you will have a true picture of my emancipated condition.
(quoted by Perry, *ibid.*, 7–8)

The quest for a cosmic “harmony” was central in William James’s engagement with mysticism, too. Yet, according to Perry, it was as “impossible for James [Sr.] to be a good Swedenborgian as to be a good Presbyterian”, because religion for him was “a matter of experience and insight, and not of dogma or historical revelation” (*ibid.*, 8) – and William followed his father in *this* respect. Thus, Henry Sr. merely (in Perry’s judgement) “looked to Swedenborg to deliver him altogether from the letter – even from the letter of Swedenborgianism” (*ibid.*). Tadd Ruetenik (2018, 5) also emphasizes that Henry Sr., despite his religious tendencies, “expressed an unexpected skepticism” about the value of the kind of alleged “communication” with angels and demons that Swedenborg, as a “seer”, was famous (and notorious) for.

While William was heavily influenced by his father and his father’s background influences (including Swedenborg and the transcendentalists), the same cautious remark can be applied to him as well. Though more optimistic than his father “about the effects of psychical research for both mind and body” (*ibid.*), he was no Swedenborgian.⁶ His Swedenborgian background is one obvious reason for taking seriously the possibility of approaching him by comparing his philosophy with mysticism and esotericism.⁷ On the other hand, there are commentators who find Swedenborg of relatively minor importance in comparison to the Calvinist influences of James and his family. This is the interpretive line taken in Jeremy Carrette’s (2013) investigation of the “relational” character of James’s philosophy of religion. Carrette identifies a “filial-Calvinistic relation” as highly significant in the emergence of both *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and the pragmatist writings (*ibid.*, chapter 3). Citing James’s discussions of his father’s work as well as his correspondence, Carrette concludes that while James was impressed by Swedenborg’s texts, which “shaped [his] appreciation of ‘unknown’ worlds”, and this “appreciation of the ‘unseen’” is “still affectively present in so far as James honours his father’s value of religious experience”, “we have little textual evidence that Swedenborg had any analytical or epistemic importance” for him (*ibid.*, 89).

It is not my aim to assess these different interpretations. My own approach to James primarily emphasizes his Kantian background (see,

e.g., Pihlström 2008, 2021) rather than his mystical or esoteric tendencies (or Calvinist ones, for that matter). While admitting that my reading may be biased, I will provide reasons for remaining cautious in attributing any robustly esoteric ideas to James. Indirectly, this reading will serve the purposes of investigating the possible intertwinements of Western philosophy and esotericism. The overlaps between James's thought and esotericism or mysticism might lead other scholars to different conclusions. Whether we need to exorcize the "demon" of skeptical scientific materialism or the one of mystical wishful thinking invoking esoteric spirituality – in the heavily metaphorical sense of pragmatist "demonology" and "exorcism" proposed by Ruetenik (2018)⁸ – we should get clear about those aspects of James's thinking that *might* lead some of us to believe that he was, possibly partly despite himself, a quasi-believer in esoteric spiritual "orders" of reality.

Three "Moments" of James's Thought in Relation to Mysticism and Esotericism

A reader approaching James's corpus with an eye on ideas that *might* come close to esotericism, or might at least be taken to be at the margins of (Western) esotericism and mysticism, may emphasize (at least) three "moments" of James's thought: first, his life-long interest in psychical research on phenomena at the "fringes" of ordinary psychology; second, his work on mysticism and mystical experience; and third, the panpsychism he developed and defended in his mature work. I will briefly discuss these in turn.

Psychical Research

James was active in what was in his days considered a possibly promising albeit controversial research program, "psychical research",⁹ participating in the Society for Psychical Research and among the founders of the American Society for Psychical Research. He was deeply interested in investigating phenomena at the fringes of science and psychology, for example, clairvoyance, mediumship, hypnotism, telepathy, and the reality of life after death.¹⁰ He apparently never ended up with firm beliefs in the reality of these phenomena but maintained a scientific and philosophical openness towards the possibility, and presumably the hope, that their reality could be established. Yet, he rejected wishful thinking postulating such phenomena without proper empirical investigation, being fully aware of the fact that much of what was going on in psychical research was simply fraud. What distinguishes James's approach from both the skeptical scientists who would never accept psychical research and the "religionists"

who would assume the reality of the spiritual was his not having “a shell of dogmatic assumptions to protect his mind” and his scientific fallibilism itself being fallible (Ruetenik 2018, 4, 7). He was *both* enthusiastic *and* critical at the same time – arguably a rare intellectual virtue.

James’s legacy in this field can be confirmed by studying, for example, his 1892 essay, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished” (in James 1979), in which he expresses his generally positive yet cautious take on the study of psychic phenomena, steering a middle course between “mechanical rationalism” and romanticism, or his late statement in 1909, “The Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher”, where he hopes that psychical research can avoid both sentimentalism and dogmatism (James 1960, 309–310). Science tends to dogmatically deny the possibility of “personal” realities; yet, it is up to science itself to continue inquiring into these realities.

Up-to-date overviews of James and “psychics” have been published by James Campbell (2017, 71–78), Tadd Ruetenik (2018, especially chapter 3), and Ermaine L. Algaier IV (2021); I have little to add to their interpretations of James in this regard. As Algaier reminds us, commentators have too quickly dismissed James’s interest in psychic phenomena as embarrassing (because scientifically dubious). Clearly, James was seriously interested in these matters, though he was viewed with suspicion by some colleagues who simply – in James’s view dogmatically – rejected psychical research due to its being un- or pseudo-scientific.

James approached psychical phenomena first and foremost as an empirical psychologist, that is, as a scientist. Whatever reality those phenomena might enjoy and whatever might be their natural or metaphysical cause, this is to be determined by meticulous investigation employing the scientific method, not by reading occult writings or adopting mysterious beliefs from dubious sources. James, even when working on psychical research, was primarily a scientific thinker. If we are ever going to end up with an empirically credible account of the reality of psychic or spiritual matters, we have to arrive at that stage through serious inquiry. However, such an inquiry itself needs an open-minded attitude that does not dogmatically deny the possibility of psychic phenomena:

Anyone with a healthy sense for evidence, a sense not methodically blunted by the sectarianism of “science”, ought now, it seems to me, to feel that exalted sensibilities and memories, veridical phantasms, haunted houses, trances with supernormal faculty, and even experimental thought-transference, are natural kinds of phenomena which ought, just like other natural events, to be followed up with scientific curiosity.

(James 1960, 227)¹¹

James's interest in paranormal phenomena led him to speculate about the possibility of there being "other consciousnesses" in the universe in addition to human consciousness. Any "overall explanation" of the "fringe phenomena" studied in psychical research seemed to require, according to James, a kind of "cosmic consciousness" environing ours (see Campbell 2017, 76). This postulation of a superhuman (albeit not necessarily infinite) consciousness is a key link between James's interest in psychic phenomena and his sympathetic attitude to mysticism.

Mystical Experience

Religious mysticism is a major theme in the *Varieties*, figuring also in *A Pluralistic Universe* and other late writings. Lectures XVI and XVII of the *Varieties*, jointly titled, "Mysticism", undoubtedly constitute the most important source of James's views in this area.¹² This text also contains some of James's few explicit references to writers that can be considered "esoteric", especially Jacob Boehme and Helena Blavatsky.

Mystical experience, we are told, is ineffable, defying expression in words, and enjoys, according to James, a distinctive "noetic" quality (James 1958, 292–293): mystical states are, for those who have them, "states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect", carrying with them "a curious sense of authority" (ibid., 293). As such, they would seem to be hospitable to an esoteric "theory" of those non-discursive and ineffable "truths". In addition, mystical experiences are characterized by transiency and passivity: they last only a short while, and they are not voluntary in any ordinary sense (ibid.). A dissolution of the (ordinary) self in religious or mystical experience flowing from some sort of cosmic consciousness is a typical characteristic of the kind of mystical states analysed by James.

The bulk of the mysticism lectures consists of long quotations and analyses of mystical writers' reports on their experiential states. Here James refers, among many other sources, to Jacob Boehme's *Theosophic Philosophy* (1691) as reporting "illuminations about the created world", as distinguished from revelations of the truth of theological doctrines (James 1958, 315n30). He also mentions Boehme's comparison of "the Primal Love" to "Nothing" – being "deeper than any Thing" – as a paradoxical expression typical of mystical writings (ibid., 320).¹³ Commenting on this example and some others (drawn from Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius), James writes:

To this dialectical use, by the intellect, of negation as a mode of passage towards a higher kind of affirmation, there is correlated the subtlest of moral counterparts in the sphere of the personal will. Since denial of the

finite self and its wants, since asceticism of some sort, is found in religious experience to be the only doorway to the larger and more blessed life, this moral mystery intertwines and combines with the intellectual mystery in all mystical writings.

(*ibid.*)

I find this illustrative not only of the mystical (or even esoteric?) parallelism between the personal and the cosmic but also of James's more general way of entangling the moral with the metaphysical (cf. Pihlström 2008). As argued by James in *Pragmatism*, our metaphysical ideas and theories get their meaning from their relations to the possible practical outcomes of our *living* as if they were true. While James was hardly any firm believer in the spiritualist theories that mystical and esoteric writers have formulated, for him the ultimate test of their possible pragmatic truth – or falsity – is their moral import. It is in this sense that Richard Gale's (1999) sharp division between James's pragmatism and mysticism is problematic. Whatever value there might be in mystical experience, or in the metaphysical ideas the (esoteric) mystic might subscribe to in order to make sense of such experience, that value needs to be pragmatically determined. Pragmatism thus prevails, even if mysticism needs to be given due philosophical attention.

H.P. Blavatsky, in turn, is cited just a couple of pages later in the *Varieties* as James's discussion of "self-contradictory phrases" continues. James quotes from Blavatsky's *The Voice of the Silence* when suggesting that it is music rather than "conceptual speech" that "is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth" and that therefore some mystical scriptures are "little more than musical compositions" (James 1958, 322). Passages like this show James at his closest to the tradition of mystical or even esoteric wisdom writing.¹⁴ However, he approaches the topic as a scholar taking a critical distance to the reports of mystical experiences he analyses, reminding us that while mystical experiences are absolutely authoritative to those enjoying them, there is no authority emanating from them that would oblige others to uncritically accept what they might be taken to reveal (*ibid.*, 323–324). Even so, they do show our "non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone", to be "only one kind of consciousness", opening "the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith" (*ibid.*, 324). The understanding of mysticism that emerges from James's analyses in the *Varieties* may thus at least keep esoteric wisdom as an open possibility, a "genuine option" (cf. James 1979, 13–15), for those temperamentally inclined (see below) towards such a way of viewing the world – but such a worldview should not be embraced uncritically.¹⁵

Towards the end of the *Varieties*, James formulates his own “over-belief” as the affirmation of there being something “more” in the universe (James 1958, 385).¹⁶ The “more” involved in mystical experience is what cannot be captured by orthodox psychological and medical studies of human experience (see Campbell 2017, 270–271). For some individuals – James’s approach to religious experience is, as is well known, resolutely individualist – wider spheres of mystical states connecting them to a “cosmic consciousness” may be open in a way they are not open to most of us. James (1958, 292) was the first to admit, in the opening paragraph of the mysticism lectures, that he did not enjoy any first-hand experience of mystical states. More generally, even when inquiring into the justifiability of religious faith – as in “The Will to Believe” (in James 1979) – James’s problem was not that he would have been tempted to embrace poorly warranted beliefs based on wishful thinking (as many of his critics have suggested) but, rather, his open-minded inability to arrive at the faith that he might, for existential and psychological reasons, have desperately needed.¹⁷

Again, when investigating mystical states and mystical experience, James was a resolutely empirical thinker. He would have had little patience with drawing one’s conclusions in this area from any dogmatically acquired beliefs. He did cite, albeit briefly, mystics like Boehme and theosophists like Blavatsky – but he treated their writings critically as empirical material to be interpreted and explained, material illustrating typical features of mystical thinking rather than texts guiding us to ineffable truths about the universe.

Accordingly, while Gale (1999) and others have been right to emphasize the tensions between James’s mysticist and pragmatist tendencies, such tensions should not be exaggerated. It is not, nor should it be, easy for a Jamesian pragmatist to simply endorse mysticism, even if mysticism were to prove pragmatically useful. Pragmatism is too integrally tied up with scientific empiricism to unproblematically join forces with mysticism. On the other hand, as will be emphasized below, pragmatism seeks to listen to other philosophical voices as carefully as possible, and therefore James the pragmatist keeps the door open to James the (potential if not actual) mystic. Pragmatism, as developed by James, is a profoundly *pluralistic* philosophy, and for the Jamesian pluralist it is essential to try to listen to, even when not approving of, the richness of views very different from one’s own.

Panpsychism

It is hardly implausible to speculate that many esotericists may be sympathetic to the core idea of panpsychism, that is, the view that the world

(or nature, or the universe) is inherently and at the fundamental metaphysical level psychic, experiential, or even proto-conscious in some sense. Given the difficulties that standard forms of physicalism and materialism face in making sense of the emergence of consciousness from inanimate and unconscious matter, panpsychism has become more popular in academic philosophy of mind and metaphysics over the past decades, with leading philosophers such as David Chalmers and Galen Strawson among its (qualified) advocates (see, e.g., Chalmers 1996; Strawson 2006). While panpsychism might be thought of as being more at home in East-Asian philosophies and religions, David Skrbina (2005), in his historical overview, claims to find panpsychist ideas in most Western thinkers and traditions, including all the classical pragmatists – among them, of course, James (see also Pihlström 2008, chapter 7).

Panpsychism could also be seen as a link between James's views on psychic phenomena and the "more" characteristic of mystical states of mind, as well as esotericism. The panpsychist need not be religious, and contemporary panpsychists (or philosophers leaning towards panpsychism), such as Chalmers and Strawson, are typically physicalists rather than religious supernaturalists, arguing, in effect, that panpsychism is a way of saving physicalism from the "mystery" of consciousness. In any event, if the universe were, at bottom, psychic in some sense, it would be easier to make sense of not only consciousness generally but also the Jamesian cosmic consciousness apparently yielding religious and mystical experiences to some of us.

James developed his "pluralistic panpsychism" in late works including *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. The basic idea of panpsychism also flows naturally from psychical research. In his "Final Impressions" in 1909, he postulated a "mother-sea" of cosmic consciousness from which our "normal" individual consciousnesses emerge as islands (James 1960, 324). Again, this leads to empirical questions about the exact nature of this "'panpsychic' view of the universe" (ibid.): "Vast, indeed, and difficult is the inquirer's prospect here ..." (ibid., 325).

It is, however, not clear what exactly James's relation to panpsychism was, and his position shifted over the years, remaining less systematically developed than one might hope. The received view is that James was sympathetic to panpsychism but never entirely embraced it; however, it has been suggested that James "squinted" towards panpsychism earlier while making a "final declaration" about it in *A Pluralistic Universe* (Kuklick 2001, 173–174), and even that James was a full-blown metaphysical panpsychist already around 1904 (Ford 1981, 1982, chapter 5). David Lamberth notes that James's pluralistic panpsychism – a moderate version of panpsychism to be distinguished from both "idealistic panpsychism" and epiphenomenalism – involves not merely the claim that "all elements

that make up the universe have an inner psychical aspect or disposition” but also the evaluative claim that “the psychical component is ‘higher’ or more valuable than the nonpsychical component”; this view, Lamberth tells us, eschews mind-matter dualism in favour of a metaphysics of pure experience, enabling James to “render intimate goals and interests potentially efficacious and real in the universe”, as well as to “pursue his spiritualistic and empiricist ideal of ‘piecemeal,’ but inherently social universe” (Lamberth 1997, 248–252).¹⁸

Marcus P. Ford claims that panpsychism – which he defines as the view that “everything actual is, or was, at least partially psychic” or “to some extent an experience for itself” – is, and was for James, a version of “metaphysical realism”, because on the panpsychist account, “the true individuals which make up tables and chairs and sticks and stones exist independently of anyone else’s experience of them” (Ford 1981, 159, 167). Thus, the panpsychist does not claim every rock or every star to be “conscious” – that would be naïve animism. Nor does panpsychism amount to Berkeleyan idealism (or phenomenalism), according to which to be is to be perceived (*ibid.*, 168). I am not convinced that Ford is right in characterizing James’s panpsychism as a form of metaphysical realism. This interpretation is plausible only insofar as it concerns the metaphysical theorizing James engaged in when defending what he called radical empiricism, according to which the world ultimately consists of pure experience (*cf.*, e.g., James 1996, 43, 88, 189). Insofar as there is a deep tension in James’s philosophy, I believe such a tension can be found between pragmatism and radical empiricism: the pragmatist evaluates all of our theories, including the postulation of “pure experience”, pragmatically, finding no metaphysics superior to any other independently of pragmatic considerations.

In developing radical empiricism, James seems to leave the panpsychism issue at least partly open. Later, when reflecting on panpsychism in relation to Henri Bergson’s and Gustav Theodor Fechner’s philosophies (James 1977, Lectures IV–VII), he describes the “pluralistic panpsychic view of the universe” as a workable hypothesis (*ibid.*, 140–141).¹⁹ However, James’s commitment to panpsychism as a metaphysical theory is clear only if we interpret radical empiricism as his primary metaphysical account. If, on the other hand, we emphasize the priority of pragmatism to any such metaphysical theories – acknowledging, with James himself (see, e.g., James 1975, Lecture III), that any metaphysical idea or question needs to be interpreted in terms of the pragmatic method drawing attention to the conceivable practical outcomes of the truth of those ideas – then it becomes doubtful whether we can attribute any “metaphysically realistic” view of panpsychism to him. Pragmatism seems to require that even panpsychism is liberated from metaphysical realism. If panpsychism can be

vindicated, this can happen only by empirical means: it could, James seems to maintain, be a theory we pragmatically *need* in order to explain the variety of psychic phenomena, though our being open to this possibility may require a temperamental affinity with such an unusual idea.

It is not clear, then, that we can employ James's panpsychism-sympathizing pronouncements as evidence of his commitment to any privileged metaphysical account of the ultimate nature of reality that could be accommodated within an esoteric or spiritual scheme of metaphysics. Panpsychism is a *human* metaphysical theory to be subordinated to pragmatism. If esoteric spiritualism postulates a metaphysical order of reality independent of human beings' practical and ethical perspectives, it cannot be a Jamesian position.

The "Unseen Order"

One of James's original and insightful concepts is, however, the idea of an "unseen order" of reality, interestingly researched by Wayne Proudfoot, in particular (see, e.g., Proudfoot 2000, 2004b). This notion is not a separate "moment" of James's thought open to esoteric interpretations – directly comparable to the three such moments discussed earlier – but something that structures that entire discussion. Psychical research, religious mysticism, and panpsychism are ways of approaching and interpreting the unseen order, emphasizing its different aspects. The idea of an unseen order may be regarded as the most significant of the links between those "moments". However, the "unseen order" James discusses is, arguably, *not* an occult or mystical ("esoteric"?) order hidden behind some veil of reality, raising spirit to a status of a metaphysical ultimate in comparison to "mere" matter, but a *human* order of meaningfulness and value, to be studied by ordinary humanistic disciplines instead of any non-scientific methodologies.

In *Pragmatism* (1975, 55), James memorably wrote that the need for an "eternal moral order" is "one of the deepest needs of our breast".²⁰ This is a theme running through his entire philosophy from the early articles collected in *The Will to Believe* via *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to the late writings on pragmatism and pluralism. The ultimate issue is whether the world (or "the universe", as James often writes) is, at bottom, "moral" or "unmoral". As James puts it in the 1879 essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality", included in *The Will to Believe*, philosophy must define future "*congruously with our spontaneous powers*" (James 1979, 70; original emphasis) in order to be pragmatically satisfactory. No matter how we interpret James's philosophy as a whole, this idea of the world being an irreducibly human world with a moral order imposed by human beings from within their practice-embedded perspectives must

be taken seriously by James's readers, and by anyone willing to further develop his ideas.

What follows is a humanistic interpretation of James. This means that the world, for James, is *not* ultimately a mystical spiritual ("esoteric") order (and not "ultimately" anything in the sense of possessing a privileged metaphysical structure in the sense of metaphysical realism) but, indeed, a human one. Proudfoot plausibly reads the Jamesian passages emphasizing the "moral order" as referring not primarily to morality (or ethics or moral philosophy) but to the "moral sciences", that is, the humanities and the social sciences (see, e.g., Proudfoot 2004b, 39–41). The question is whether the world we live in is reductively accountable in terms of scientific materialism, according to which human meanings and values are unreal (or at least reducible to more fundamental layers of reality), or whether the world contains meanings and values that can only be adequately articulated in terms of the arts and the humanities. This is not "merely" a question concerning ethics but a question concerning our ways of viewing the world as "human" in a general sense (though any such world-viewing arguably contains an ethical dimension).

The relevant contrast, then, is between "moral" and "unmoral" rather than between "moral" and "immoral". Viewing the world as lacking a "moral order" would not be a view of an "immoral" but an "unmoral" (non-moral) world that would indeed be reductively accounted for in terms of, for example, mechanistic materialism according to which human meanings, values, freedom, and morality are either mere illusions to be eliminated from the scientific picture of the world or something to be reduced to (being "nothing over and above") mere matter in motion. (An "immoral" world, however, would already presuppose a moral order.) James's way of countering scientific reductionism thus offers a pragmatist context for discussing truth and realism in the philosophy of the humanities, that is, for approaching the question about the "reality" that the humanities are concerned with – but also for humanism more generally.²¹

Accordingly, it is the task of the disciplines within the humanities to inquire into the human world as it is constructed and understood by human beings in its meaningful and valuational structures. For example, insofar as we classify religious studies as a discipline within the humanities (broadly speaking), it can, presumably, explore the "moral order" of the world from its own perspective – also by drawing attention to the mystical meanings some of us may associate with the "moral order". By no means does this mean that the religious studies scholar should be committed to the religious or spiritual thinking they examine. James's emphasis on the "moral order" leads us to observe that when investigating the nature of religion and mystical experiences as human ways of responding to reality, a fundamental issue is whether to understand reality as a collection of

ultimately meaningless material processes and contingent natural facts or as meaningfully “shaped to”, or perhaps to a certain degree shaped “by”, our purposive, value-driven habits of thinking and acting. The relevant question here is, then, to what extent religion (or mysticism) is a topic for an irreducibly humanistic inquiry that may, pragmatically, focus on its “fruits” in our lives, rather than for natural-scientific inquiry focusing on its causal origins (see Proudfoot 2004b, 37).²² For example, the cognitive study of religion would, in the contemporary academia, represent the latter naturalized approach. Maintaining a critical distance to such an approach in favour of a humanistic orientation does not, however, entail endorsing mysticism or esotericism.

Clearly, for James (and Jamesian pragmatists), it is also ethically significant whether we view disciplines such as religious studies as (partly) humanistic or as primarily or even exclusively scientific, for example, as based on evolutionary psychology and cognitive science – even though James’s concept of a “moral order” is not restricted to ethics or morality. These concerns can be extended from the philosophy of religious studies to the philosophy of the humanities more generally. It may be examined how James’s thought – primarily but not exclusively his pragmatism – can be employed in constructing a comprehensive pragmatist account of the humanities seeking truths about the humanly meaningful and valuational reality that disciplines like history, religious studies, or literary theory aim at explaining and understanding. James’s life-long engagements not only with psychology and religion but also with literature and history would be central to this topic. So would further interpretations of James’s pragmatism that develop, for example, a pragmatist conception of truth that would be available to us within humanistic processes of inquiry as much as scientific ones (see Pihlström 2021, 2022).

The unseen order is not, as such, an order we could get to “know” in the sense in which the mystic might be tempted to claim that we can know, on the basis of mystical experience (or, possibly, esoteric wisdom) revealing the secrets of the universe. Rather, it plays a role in *enabling* our non-mysterious humanistic knowledge about the world. There can, arguably, be no esoteric “knowledge”, also because (in a Jamesian articulation) mystical experience is a matter of going beyond conceptualized knowledge, despite its “noetic quality”.

However, even though there cannot be esoteric knowledge in any unproblematic sense, there can, presumably, be some kind of esoteric or mystic *meaningfulness* or *significance*, a special way of viewing the world as meaningful in a deepest possible way. At least we may non-dogmatically recognize the possibility that some of us may enjoy experiences enabling them to view the world thus. However, the Jamesian pragmatist can take a critical approach to such meaning-making, as pragmatism can generally

be characterized as a critique of our habits of meaning-construction (see Pihlström 2023). It is not ethically unproblematic, from a Jamesian perspective, to seek esoteric or metaphysical meanings in our lives. This may be an *illusory* search for meanings hiding the real problems of life. While James was sympathetic to Swedenborg, I believe he could have joined Immanuel Kant in considering the Swedish mystic's views as "*Träume eines Geistersehers*" ("dreams of a spirit-seer") to be avoided by the critical thinker.

In order to have a "moral order" (in a humanistic sense), we need, furthermore, a genuine self that does not dissolve into a world-spirit. From a pragmatist perspective, full-blown mysticism would, ultimately, threaten human freedom. This leads us to yet another Jamesian theme, the significance – and irreducibility – of individual temperament.

Philosophical Temperaments

The concept of a philosophical temperament, introduced in Lecture I of James's *Pragmatism*, is particularly interesting in relation to mysticism and esotericism, as the doctrine of temperaments is a classical idea in mystical traditions, including accounts of personality in terms of temperaments handed down to us by spiritual orders or "the universe". However, again, James's discussion of philosophical temperaments is primarily psychological and philosophically pragmatist rather than esoteric or mystical.²³ James saw the history of philosophy, "to a great extent", as "a certain clash of human temperaments":

Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries when philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament. Temperament is no conventionally recognized reason, so he urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions. Yet, his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other, making for a more sentimental or more hard-hearted view of the universe He *trusts* his temperament. Wanting a universe that suits it, he believes in any representation of the universe that does suit it. He feels men of opposite temper to be out of key with the world's character, and in his heart considers them incompetent and "not in it", in the philosophic business, even tho they may far excel him in dialectical ability.

(James 1975, 11)

"Temperaments with their cravings and refusals", he added, "do determine men in their philosophies, and always will" (*ibid.*, 24). The core of James's view is that philosophical positions are adopted by real

flesh-and-blood human beings living in the natural and social world, not by immaterial intellects employing mere evidence and argument to support their conclusions. Philosophizing is not a purely theoretical activity but grounded in our individual needs and interests. The doctrine of philosophical temperaments, inseparable from James's pragmatism,²⁴ also includes the idea that philosophizing ought to be a reflexively self-conscious – and self-critical – endeavour.

In emphasizing the temperamental basis of philosophy, James hopes to make us better aware of this inescapable feature of genuine philosophical activity. Despite the resemblance to esoteric doctrines of temperamental psychology, the thrust of his position is, I believe, the opposite. Our temperaments are *not* ready-made or handed down to us by superhuman forces with whom we should seek a mystical harmony. Instead, they are our own psychological and philosophical creations for which we should take full responsibility. By philosophizing we continuously paint self-portraits of ourselves as reflecting individuals. We cannot responsibly deny that our temperaments may also lead us astray, and sometimes we may come to think that they have actually done so and thus find it necessary to revise not only our beliefs about the world but their temperamental grounding. A philosophical temperament can be revised as it produces – pragmatically – results we cannot (or can no longer) see as “ours”. At its best, philosophical discussion amounts to a sincere and honest effort to identify and characterize the needs and aims of the temperaments grounding it. The eminently fallible activity of entering into philosophical dialogues among temperaments is, according to James, still a rational project, with rationality itself conceived as pragmatic.²⁵

James was, temperamentally, a philosopher of *freedom*: the world is not determined but remains open to human contribution, to our shaping of reality based on our purposive practices. As mystics might emphasize, the world is not determined by material forces investigated by science, but according to James it is not determined by any mystical scheme revealed to us in esoteric wisdom, either. Whatever determination there is in the human world (beyond purely physical and material processes) flows from human beings' purposive activities. The reflexive concept of a philosophical temperament reminds us of the freedom and responsibility of the individual. We are encouraged to investigate not only the world around us but also, in the spirit of Kantian critical philosophy, our own capacities of investigation and reflection themselves. It is precisely in his apparently (but only apparently) reductively psychologistic account of philosophical temperaments that James is, much more profoundly, a Kantian critical thinker, rather than either a psychologistic reductionist or an esoteric mystic. This alone places him far from any genuinely esoteric tradition, while the reference to temperaments might invite such comparisons.

James is also, perhaps most importantly, a philosopher of *individual* freedom: the world must in some sense be responsive to our individual temperaments. But, again, this is not esoteric but (lacking a better word) discursive dependence. We are continuously responsible for our philosophical temperaments also in the sense that it is at our own responsibility to reflect on how we expect the world to be responsive to what we say and think about it. We are free to categorize the world as we find best, but such categorization must be tested empirically, and thereby even the temperamental basis of our categorizing activities may have to be reconsidered.

My reading of James on the philosophical temperaments is presumably opposed to readings that might be presented from an esoteric standpoint. Instead of linking us with spiritual “orders” or forces of the universe that would explain our personal temperaments analogously to the way astrologists believe our personalities to be explained by the movements of heavenly bodies, the concept of a philosophical temperament encourages us to the thoroughly human practice of critical self-examination. It functions as a kind of metaphilosophical mirror: we have to know who we are in order to be able to philosophize. In this reflexivity, the Jamesian notion of temperament, as far as it may seem to be from the core traditions of Western thought emphasizing impersonal and non-temperamental rationality, is a relative of the reflexive self-critique of reason familiar from Kantian philosophy (see also Pihlström 2021), showing how that critique can avoid excessive (in James’s memorable terms, “vicious”) intellectualism.

Conclusion: Cosmic Harmony

Esoteric philosophy (as this book as a whole demonstrates) takes many forms, but I suppose we can say that it is *not* a form of humanism, at least not in the sense of any classical or Enlightenment humanism. This is why it is in tension with Jamesian pragmatist humanism, no matter how deeply James may have been interested in mystical and even esoteric ideas. Accordingly, my conclusion is – unfortunately for some, fortunately for others – that while James might be thought of as a “serious” philosopher lending some support to esotericism, this is not the case, despite his undeniable mysticist sympathies.

As no lesser a reader of James than the hard-boiled naturalist George Santayana noted, both William and his brother Henry Jr. were “as tightly swaddled in” what Santayana labelled “the genteel tradition” in American philosophy “as any infant geniuses could be”, for they were born “in a Swedenborgian household”, yet “they burst those bands almost entirely” (Santayana 2009, 13). Elsewhere, Santayana remarked that “[t]he pictures that religion had painted of heaven or the millennium were not what [James] prized, although his Swedenborgian connection might have made

him tender to them, as perhaps it did to familiar spirits” (ibid., 60).²⁶ Reading James simply as an esoteric thinker would be alarmingly analogous to interpreting his “will to believe” doctrine as a variant of the popular modern magic of “manifestation”, which harbours the – for reasonable pragmatists insane – idea of acquiring material fortunes by means of positive thinking.

This does not mean that James could not be interestingly interpreted in *critical comparison* to mysticism and esotericism. For example, Jo Pearson (2003) perceives a link between James’s investigations of ritual and religious experience, on the one hand, and “neopaganism”, on the other. However, in my view such rather far-fetched readings are “creative misreadings” at best. I am not convinced that they enhance our understanding of the complexity of James’s philosophy, though they may cast some unusual light on it.

As we saw, James (1975, 55) wrote that our “need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast”. In addition to being an affirmation of our need for a “human order”, this is a need for a “cosmic harmony” with the universe, for being “at home” in the world, and according to James this is a need we as human beings *naturally* have. It would “contradict the very spirit of life to say that our minds must be indifferent and neutral in questions like that of the world’s salvation” (ibid., 137).²⁷ Indeed, this is a human need. Some of us may try to fulfil this need with reference to what others take to be unfounded beliefs about layers of hidden spiritual truths. But many of us recognize it as something purely natural, or naturally human, and seek to account for the moral value and significance of this need, and our pursuit of it, by means of humanistic philosophical (as well as, possibly, theological) thought. There is no higher route to “the world’s salvation” than free and responsible human activity, including critical inquiry. On my reading, James primarily belongs to the pragmatist tradition of developing a never-ending critical inquiry into the ways we (epistemically and ethically) ought to view the world from within our temperamentally shaped practices – or, at least, this was the dominant part of his complex philosophical temperament.

One option for a modern reader of James, especially a reader well versed in analytic philosophy of religion, is to interpret James’s views on psychic phenomena, the “more”, and the eternally harmonious and possibly salvific unseen order of the universe as religiously allegorical “fictions”. This *fictionalist* account would perhaps yield a plausible interpretation of those aspects of his thought that are the most difficult to reconcile with a scientific picture of the world. The cosmic order of harmony and salvation would be a useful fiction. Esoteric writings would then also be so many fictions making some of us feel better. On the other hand, given James’s pragmatism and the pragmatist conception of truth, such a fictionalist

account is hardly the last word about his views. It may have local validity when it comes to explaining his most anti- or pseudo-scientific pronouncements, but his philosophy of religion cannot be reduced to fictionalism. This is because he was, primarily, interested in the pragmatic *truth* and *reality* of the religious phenomena he explored.

James, early and late, hoped to develop a philosophy enabling us to feel “at home” in the universe. The “sentiment of rationality” defines the universe “congruously with our spontaneous powers”. However, he never accepted straightforwardly esoteric or mystical solutions to these fully natural human needs. His humanism led him to affirm the fundamental insecurity of our fragile human condition:

For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All ‘homes’ are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it.

(James 1975, 125)

There is nothing outside the human world – the flux of human experience – to secure our moral order, or our place in the universe. Pragmatically responsible critical thinking is resolutely *anti-foundationalist*. Mystical thinking, from a Jamesian perspective, is thus flawed if it leads us to believe, against evidence and reason, that the world is more mysterious or “enchanted” than it is.²⁸ On the other hand, James’s pragmatism encourages us to genuinely and attentively listen to what others have to say and to avoid being “blind” to others’ perspectives on life and its possible meanings (see James 1962).²⁹ Therefore, even if we cannot interpret James as having been committed to any esoteric system of thought, we may see him, at a meta-level, as recommending an open and tolerant attitude to ideas that are very far from, and can for temperamental reasons never become, our own.³⁰

Notes

- 1 For up-to-date essays on James’s thought, see Marchetti 2021. Among the relatively recent general interpretations of James, one of the best is Campbell 2017. For my own earlier interpretations and further developments of James’s pragmatism, see Pihlström 2008, 2021.
- 2 I have no original definition of esotericism to offer; many of the other essays in this collection, as well as the editor’s introduction, elaborate on this concept more substantially. When contrasting James’s thought with more robustly esoteric philosophies, I roughly mean by the latter views that

postulate transcendent metaphysical realities such as divine, spiritual, or angelic beings – presumably available to us through mystical experiences and/or ancient wisdom – unacknowledged in mainstream science and philosophy. As this volume as a whole argues, this simplified conception of esotericism can, however, be challenged by emphasizing the multiple ways in which esoteric ideas have been entangled with major philosophical traditions. In this context it may, I hope, also be interesting to examine some Jamesian ideas at the margins of esotericism, without claiming to find any clear articulation of esotericism in his writings.

- 3 See Ruetenik 2018 on James and his “demons”. (I will return to Ruetenik’s interpretation below.)
- 4 The influence of the transcendentalists on the early pragmatists, including James, has been so thoroughly documented and investigated that I will not dwell on that topic. See Perry 1964 as well as, for more recent scholarship on early (pre-pragmatist) American philosophy, Goodman 2015. On Emerson’s multifaceted philosophical impact, including his influence on James and the other classical pragmatists, see, e.g., Kovalainen 2010.
- 5 See, e.g., Matthiessen 2008; Perry 1964; Värilä 1977; Myers 1986; Carrette 2013, chapter 3; Ruetenik 2018, chapter 1.
- 6 Värilä (1977) finds Swedenborgian roots for most of James’s key ideas, including pragmatism, the will to believe, the “faith ladder”; her work is scholarly but somewhat speculative in insisting that James’s philosophy generally can be traced back to his Swedenborgian influences. For a comparison between Henry Sr.’s “vastation” experience with William’s analogous experience (as later documented in the *Varieties*), see Ruetenik 2018, 16–20. Ruetenik claims that “the ideas of Swedenborg are intertwined with those of James the Elder in a way that is not unlike demonic possession, certainly in the poetic, *daimonic* sense” (ibid., 17–18), calling Swedenborg William James’s “societal grandfather” (ibid., 19). Ruetenik expresses some sympathy to Swedenborg’s description of a universe “filled with meaning” and “spiritual insinuations” – but this is, for him, a mere “hope” that Swedenborg might be right (ibid., 130).
- 7 An important source of William James’s relationship to his father’s thinking, including Swedenborgianism, is his introduction to the “literary remains” of Henry Sr., available, e.g., in Matthiessen’s (2008, 136–189) family biography (see 160–167 for extensive quotations of Henry Sr.’s descriptions of the relief he got from Swedenborg’s writings). See also Carrette 2013, especially 90–96; Ruetenik 2018, chapter 1. For invaluable information about the James family library containing works by mystics like Swedenborg, Jakob Boehme, and Helena Blavatsky, see Algaier 2020.
- 8 For Ruetenik (2018), the demonic, including demonic possession, should be understood at least partly *poetically* with reference to the concept of *daimon*. While I am surprised that Ruetenik seems to take seriously even the strangest aspects of James’s legacy, such as the claims by some later spiritualists to have received messages from him from beyond the grave (see ibid., chapter 4), I do find Ruetenik’s explorations of pragmatist “exorcism” in relation to René

- Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism (ibid., chapter 7) an interesting expansion of standard pragmatist scholarship.
- 9 This field of study is often also called "parapsychology". I have no clear view on the exact relations between esotericism and psychical research, but it is probably safe to say that both operate in terms of a background theory according to which there is an unseen spiritual world beyond the observable world known by natural science. Mystical experiences may connect some of us with such supernatural realities.
 - 10 James discussed theories of personal immortality also in writings that cannot be classified as belonging to psychical research, including "Human Immortality" (James 1982; also available in James 1960).
 - 11 The quotation is from James's review of Frederick W.H. Myers's *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, 1903.
 - 12 Interpretations of the *Varieties* range from those emphasizing James as a pioneer of an interdisciplinary "science of religions" (see Proudfoot 2004a) to philosophical readings centered around the ideas of pure experience and radical empiricism (see, e.g., Lamberth 1999, especially chapter 3). Neither philosophical nor more interdisciplinary readers seem to find James's esoteric connections worth exploring in any detail.
 - 13 His reference is to a 1901 edition of Boehme's *Dialogues on the Supersensual Life*. See again Algaier 2020 for the books in the James library, including Boehme's works.
 - 14 See, however, James (1960, 37, 64), for references to Blavatsky confirming that he agreed with many contemporaries about Blavatsky's having been found guilty of fraud.
 - 15 See again Ruetenik 2018 for an emphasis on James's anti-dogmatic open-mindedness extending to views that most of us would consider suspiciously non-scientific.
 - 16 For an excellent discussion of James's concept of the "more" in relation to his aesthetic and poetic orientation, see Carrette 2013, chapter 6.
 - 17 On "The Will to Believe" and the more general orientation of Jamesian pragmatist philosophy of religion between the evidentialist and fideist extremes of contemporary philosophy of religion, see Pihlström 2013, 2021. In "The Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher" in 1909, James speaks about the "will to communicate" postulated by the "spiritist" view, in contrast to the "will to deceive" that "materialistic science" only perceives in psychical research (James 1960, 323).
 - 18 Lamberth (1997, 250) locates the emergence of James's panpsychism in notes written in 1905–1907, although the actual formulation can only be found in *A Pluralistic Universe*, while Ford (1981, 1982) sees James as a panpsychist already in 1900–1904. I have little to add to Lamberth's (1999, 185–196) exposition of the pluralistic panpsychism of *A Pluralistic Universe*. One of James's earliest favourable statements about panpsychism occurs in the 1881 paper, "Reflex Action and Theism" (in James 1979).
 - 19 For further references to James's less well-known writings, lecture notes, and letters exploring panpsychism, see Pihlström 2008, chapter 7. For example, a

- letter from Charles Augustus Strong to James on 5 October 1907, seems to provide evidence of James's commitment to panpsychism, referring to James's views "before [his] conversion to or confirmation in panpsychism" (James 2003, 458; cf. Skrbina 2005, 144, 147).
- 20 This phrase occurred already, e.g., in the 1898 lecture and essay, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results", available among the appendix materials of the Harvard edition of *Pragmatism* (see Proudfoot 2004b, 32).
 - 21 See Pihlström 2022. See also James's characterization of the pragmatic method and its application to the debate between theism and materialism (James 1975, Lecture III). Cf. Gunnarsson's (2020) related explorations of James's early views on the personal and emotional basis of philosophical truth.
 - 22 See also Proudfoot 2000, 2018 for methodological reflections on the unseen order and pragmatic naturalism in religious studies.
 - 23 To what extent James was aware of, say, the history of the doctrine of "four temperaments" in ancient Greek medicine is a question I must leave to those with a more biographical interest in James.
 - 24 We can also see it as entangled with the idea of the "moral order", because it is through our temperaments that we construct the (or any) moral order possible for *us* to live within as the individuals we are.
 - 25 For readings of James emphasizing our responsibility for our philosophical temperaments and the idea that temperaments are subject to criticism, see Putnam (1990, 228); Conant (1997, 208).
 - 26 Instead, Santayana (2009, 60) correctly observes, what James found most important in religion was the "moral succour" it offered. James's philosophy of religion is generally best conceived as an extended investigation of the ethical dimensions of religious life and experience. This, again, places him in a broadly Kantian tradition, from within which Swedenborgian and other esoteric ways of thinking fall in their place as "*Träume eines Geistersehers*".
 - 27 The concept of salvation here is not exactly the Christian concept but a broader religious (mystical) idea of an ultimately happy and meaningful fate of the world.
 - 28 On James's views on the will to believe in comparison to the notion of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) we owe to Max Weber, see Pihlström 2021, chapter 4.
 - 29 James's metaphors of "blindness" (to others' lives) and "deafness" (to what he called "the cries of the wounded") could also be entangled with the study of his mystical and possibly esoteric "moments", but this needs to be left for another occasion.
 - 30 Thanks are due to Olli Pitkänen for the kind invitation to contribute this essay and for valuable comments on an earlier draft.

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11 The Starry Heavens Within

Roy Bhaskar and the Theosophical Depths of Critical Realism

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm

It is not that there are the starry heavens above and the moral law within, as Kant would have it; rather, the true basis of your virtuous existence is the fact that the starry heavens are within you, and you are within them.

-Roy Bhaskar, *The Philosophy of MetaReality* (2012)

Introduction

Critical Realism – almost since its foundation in the 1970s by the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014) – has regularly been lauded as “an all-inclusive philosophy of science” (Lawani 2021, see also Corson 1991). Starting especially in the 1980s, Critical Realism rapidly gained recognition in different academic disciplines for its critiques of both positivism and post-modernism, for emphasising analytical precision, providing robust support for scientific inquiry, and for delivering the philosophical grounding for quantitative research within the social sciences. Although it is possible its high-water mark has already been reached, even today, its continuing influence can be seen in dedicated scholarly journals, multiple book series, and a devoted community of adherents committed to furthering its legacy.

Critical Realism – as a movement originating in an analytical approach to philosophy of science – might therefore seem to be one of the least likely of philosophies to have any connection to esotericism. Nevertheless, I’ll demonstrate that this philosophical program, particularly through its founder’s contributions, actually exemplifies the confluence of philosophy and esotericism. Indeed, what may not be evident to those with only a cursory acquaintance with the movement is that Bhaskar was raised in a theosophical household; and his engagement with theosophical ideas wasn’t merely a peripheral interest – it was at the core of his broader endeavour. This became increasingly clear throughout his career, as he openly emphasised his New Age interests over time. While inhouse

histories of Critical Realism sometimes mention Bhaskar's later "turn" to spirituality, continuities can be found between his earlier and later philosophical works. Hence, this chapter will explain the connection between Bhaskar's rigorous attempts to root his work in scientific realism and his later proposals about the possible reality of reincarnation, deities, spirits, and psychic powers.

All that is to say, Bhaskar has been celebrated for steering philosophy of science towards ontology in a period when such was out of vogue. As is widely recognised, central to his philosophical program was the putatively "transcendental" claim that scientific progress hinges on the excavation of increasingly deeper ontological layers. Yet, what often escapes both critics and supporters is that Bhaskar's own ontology had theosophical depths. This chapter excavates those. In doing so, it aligns with a set of works in which I have examined the theosophical influences on William James, Benjamin Whorf, and others (Storm 2017, Storm 2021b, Storm, forthcoming; for other scholars looking at theosophical influences, see also Stang and Storm eds, forthcoming; and Krämer and Strube eds, 2020). Taken together, this has been part of a broader project to reflect on the historical impact of the Theosophical Society.

For those unfamiliar with the Theosophical Society, it was established in New York City in 1875. Under the leadership of Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, this organisation was dedicated to the study of comparative religion in order to rediscover ancient wisdom. From its small beginnings, the Theosophical Society eventually evolved into a major global movement, perhaps peaking in 1928 at about 45,000 official adherents with more than a 1000 lodges in over 40 countries, not counting several influential offshoots. As a central vector connecting Asia, North America, and Western Europe, the society significantly contributed to the Euro-American adoption of yoga and Buddhism. Its influence was monumental, shaping many aspects of global metaphysical religion. This included everything from the idea of auras, spiritual evolution, and reincarnation to the belief in ascended masters. Often regarded as the genesis of the New Age movement, the term "New Age" itself, especially in its association with these esoteric currents, owes much of its widespread usage to the theosophist, Alice Bailey. In sum, the Theosophical Society was perhaps the most important new religious movement of the late nineteenth century (and unarguably the most important movement in the globalisation of esotericism) and its fingerprint can be found in a host of areas, but only in recent decades has the impact of this organisation begun to be studied seriously by scholars.

This particular case matters because philosophy and esotericism are often viewed as fundamentally opposed. Yet, Bhaskar was deeply involved

in both. Furthermore, his philosophical endeavour was not just any branch of philosophy but a critical realist philosophy of science. His contributions were rooted in a purportedly rigorous and analytical examination of its primary subject. Further, his engagement with esotericism was not superficial or marginal but involved deep participation in a paradigmatic esoteric movement, the Theosophical Society. This involvement appears to have led him to embrace many of the essential esoteric subjects of the late twentieth century. What follows will aim to make sense of this seeming contradiction.

Bhaskar's Contribution to Critical Realism

Bhaskar demonstrated how the preservation of the rational insights ... in the philosophy of science necessitated the construction of a new ontology - and of a corresponding account of (natural) science This was a shift in philosophy, referred to by some as a Copernican Revolution, that culminated in a new *realist* philosophy of science.

Roy Bhaskar & Tony Lawson, "Introduction,"
Critical Realism: Essential Readings (1998)

Roy Bhaskar's foundational contribution to the philosophy of science was crystallised in his initial monographs *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1978). Indeed, the designation "Critical Realism" synthesises the dedication to "transcendental realism," prominently featured in the former, with the "critical naturalism" that concentrates on the social sciences in the latter (Collier 1994, xi).

The opening gambit of the first book – which ultimately became pivotal for the entire movement – was a "a transcendental argument from the nature of experimental activity" in the sciences (Bhaskar 2008, 2, see also Clarke 2010). Bhaskar argued that the feasibility of scientific experiments necessarily implies the existence of an underlying reality that is distinct from our perceptions of it. He further argued that, because scientific experiments are capable of producing new knowledge through experiments, the depths of this reality must be both structured and mind-independent. Thus, it enables scientists to manipulate conditions and observe outcomes that reveal aspects of the world's inherent structure (see also, Collier 1994, 31–33).

Central to the ensuing theorisation was Bhaskar's further articulation of the implicit ontological stratification—that the very essence of being and the world, is not a monolithic structure, but rather is comprised of three distinct yet interrelated layers or domains: the real, the actual, and the empirical. At the foundation, the "real" encompasses the underlying mechanisms and structures that, while often imperceptible, govern

the phenomena we observe. Ascending from this foundational layer, the “actual” refers to the events that occur as a consequence of these mechanisms’ activation or interaction, observable or not. The pinnacle, the “empirical,” represents the subset of actual events that we can observe, measure, and experience directly. At times, Bhaskar described these ontological domains as nested layers; on other occasions, he referred to them as mechanisms or strata (e.g., Bhaskar 2008, 160–161; Collier 1994, 4–5). Yet, the notion of ontological stratification remained essential.

Bhaskar’s account of science occasionally suggested something reminiscent of a scientific Neo-Kantianism. Scientific progress is described as an asymptotic journey of discovery, exploring phenomena and methodically peeling back layer after layer of the universe’s fabric; with the “real” assuming a role akin to the *noumena* or *Ding an sich* as a foundational essence perpetually beyond empirical grasp.¹ Later Bhaskar will identify this final, and truly transcendent layer, with a kind of absolute. But the main thrust of the initial argument was to emphasise both the intelligibility of the “real world” and to account for an endless scientific progress including paradigm shifts.

Bhaskar thus argued that a direct implication of this scientific ontology was an “epistemic relativism” that is to say that “whenever we speak of things or of events etc. in science we must always speak of them and know them under particular descriptions” (Bhaskar 2008, 240). This was his attempt to account for both fallibilism and the differences between paradigms discussed so famously by Thomas Kuhn and his peers. But Bhaskar explicitly rejected the Kuhnian account of incommensurability. Kuhn argued that paradigms cannot be compared or translated into each other because there is no neutral place to stand and because they are embedded in radically different conceptual languages. In contrast, Bhaskar argued that the same object can be known under different descriptions (Bhaskar 2008, 241) and that this enables the comparison between paradigms if not their identity. To be sure, because of the broadly Neo-Kantian orientation discussed above, Bhaskar also suggested that the real is only capable of partial description via the actual. Accordingly, this implies an epistemic relativism insofar as different paradigms are approaching the same ultimate object from different vantage points and describing it partially or at least differently in their own discursive system (see also Collier 1994, 57). To caricature this slightly, one might say that for Bhaskar different scientific paradigms and research methods are just different paths up the same mountain.

Bhaskar’s foray into the social sciences began repeating a version of his motivating question in a different arena, asking: “What properties do societies possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?” (Bhaskar 2005, 27). This inquiry led to an account of society as both

the condition and product of human activities. In so doing, he aimed to reconcile the impact of individual agency with the persistent nature of social structures; and to make a case for both transitive and intransitive dimensions of human society.² Particularly valuable in this enterprise, from my perspective, was Bhaskar's focus on the concept of emergence and the broader importance of attention on social ontology referred to as his "transformational model of social activity." I'll hold off on a fuller exposition here as it is less germane to the specificity of Bhaskar's theosophical depths. But what I want to emphasise is that Bhaskar basically took what he said about nature and then said it about people. It is human society, now, that seemingly exhibits layers (or at least structures) and it is the job of social sciences to excavate those.

This brief summary merely scratches the surface of Bhaskar's rich early philosophical works. Further, his intellectual project did not conclude with his initial two publications. On the contrary, Bhaskar developed a progressively complex framework with an increasingly baroque set of technical terminology. Moreover, the political stakes of this project also became clearer over time as he increasingly emphasised the centrality of articulating the conditions necessary for human freedom and emancipation. A common way to describe his broader trajectory is that Bhaskar's *Critical Realism* evolved into *dialectical Critical Realism*, stressing change and contradiction, particularly within societies. This phase further morphed into *transcendental dialectical realism*, sometimes equated with the philosophy of "MetaReality," exploring themes of non-duality and the inter-connectedness of being. While Bhaskar's oeuvre can be categorised in various ways, commentators view Bhaskar's so-called "spiritual turn" as a pivotal moment transitioning from the initial Critical Realism to its subsequent iteration. Nonetheless, Bhaskar himself suggested that each phase of his thinking was grounded in the preceding phase of his project and thus represented an evolutionary throughline from his initial intuitions (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010).

Bhaskar's Theosophical Background

To say a few words before I begin my talk about my personal connection with Krishnamurti [one-time official World Teacher and nominal leader of the Theosophical Society]. I cannot really say very much more than anyone else knows—that he was a wonderful man, charismatic, striking. I met him in Chennai and I met him in London and even though I was very young, my father, who I should say who was not really an orthodox theosophist, used to read Krishnamurti, among many other things, so I picked up Krishnamurti's books when I was quite young.

Roy Bhaskar, *From Science to Emancipation* (2002)

Ram Roy Bhaskar was born in London in 1944 into a family of diverse cultural backgrounds. His father, hailing from a Brahmin family in Gujranwala, India, pursued a career in medicine and relocated to London at the onset of the Second World War, while Bhaskar's mother, an English native, had spent a considerable part of her youth in South Africa, eventually working as a nurse in Brighton where the couple met (see Hartwig "Introduction" to Bhaskar 2008, xii). Although he recorded being pressured by his father to pursue medicine, Bhaskar broke from his paternal influence at Balliol College, Oxford where in 1963 he focused on philosophy, politics, and economics. Bhaskar began a doctorate at Nuffield College, Oxford originally intended to focus on economics, until his interests shifted and he ultimately pursued a thesis in philosophy of science under the tutelage of the New Zealand-British philosopher, Rom Harré. This thesis was published, with minor edits, as his first book, the aforementioned *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975). In the years that followed, Bhaskar taught at the University of Edinburgh and then moved to the University of Sussex. Starting in 2007, Bhaskar was employed at the Institute of Education, in London. He passed away in November 2014.

To fully grasp the esoteric elements shaping Bhaskar's thoughts, it is vital to explore his upbringing. There is much evidence of his parents' interest in theosophy. For instance, in an interview with Mervyn Martwig published in 2010, Bhaskar remarked:

[Upon marrying] my mother assumed an Indian identity; her maiden name was Marjorie and she now took the name Kamla. She and my father became adherents of Theosophy ... and remained such for the rest of their lives... Much of my childhood when I wasn't at school was spent accompanying my parents on visits to these other Indian families or to the various societies and functions my parents attended, especially the Theosophical Society.

(Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 3)

Elaborating on his childhood, Bhaskar added "Whenever my parents took me to the Theosophical Society I used to really enjoy that, not so much for the content of the lectures ... but for the time I would spend in the library" (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 6). Further exploring his youthful engagement with theosophy, Bhaskar shared:

I knew quite a lot about Theosophy as there were many Theosophical books in my parents' house, and also many books about religion, and about medicine. So when I went to the Theosophical Society library, which was a good one, I picked on the things that Theosophy did not talk about ... in so far as I was interested in Theosophy, it was a

this-worldly interest, my concern was with how it could alter situations in the here and now.

(Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 6)

In a separate conversation with Savita Singh, Bhaskar elucidates, “By the time I was about nine, my father had filled his house (or houses) with books, partly on philosophy and partly on esoteric religion and spirituality. He was a member of the Theosophical Society.” (Singh and Bhaskar 2020, 1).

These accounts collectively provide evidence for how Bhaskar’s early years were steeped in theosophy and a broad reading in other esoteric literature. This early immersion seems to have established a foundational background that would later permeate his philosophical inquiries.

Hartwig insightfully probes,

some of the ideas of the spiritual turn are also central to Theosophy; for example, the notion that all religions are attempts to approach the absolute, so each offers a perspective on the same underlying reality. Indeed, if you substitute “norm” for “religion”, the motto of the Theosophical Society could serve as a motto informing all your work: “There is no religion higher than truth?.”

(Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 7)

Responding to this, Bhaskar shares:

I think what attracted me about Theosophy most, abstracting from my parents’ involvement in it, was an idea that you also find in some theological critical realists, funnily enough. (Of course I didn’t know anything about them at the time.) This was the idea you mentioned that the different religions are different paths to essentially the same goal, which is knowledge of, or identification with, or bringing about, the absolute. To put it in theological critical realist terms, the different main teachings of these world religions are different conceptions of the absolute.

(Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 7)

Again, it is worth stressing that Bhaskar agrees with Hartwig’s observations, emphasising the resonance he finds in the Theosophical dogma that all religions, in their essence, navigate towards a singular destination: the absolute truth.

Furthermore, in his dialogue with Singh, Bhaskar reflects on a moment from his childhood, sharing that during a divinity class at the age of five, he confidently expressed, “I believe there is good in all religions, and there is truth in all religions” (Singh and Bhaskar 2020, 2). This perspective,

intriguingly mirrored in theological Critical Realism (discussed next), suggests that diverse doctrines of world religions are but varied interpretations of the same ultimate reality. It is not too much of a stretch to see this same view in the background of Bhaskar's influential account of a realist view of science, in which, as noted above, he presents different scientific paradigms as reaching towards the same object.

Bhaskar also emphasises his perception of what constitutes the esoteric tradition across various faiths. He clarifies: "Actually this marks out a distinctive tradition of interpretation within all the great world religions What all these positions did is formulate a contrast between the higher truth, which was known to the esoteric, and the ordinary truth" (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 7–8). Bridging this concept to specific religious practices, he further explains,

This idea appeared in a popular form in esoteric Hinduism and Buddhism: that Rama, Krishna, and so on, were followed by Buddha, by Jesus, and perhaps Muhammad; so that these were all equally but differently avatars or, as it were, messengers of God. This is one of the features of Theosophy that I particularly liked.

(Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 8)

Through these reflections, Bhaskar is embracing theosophy's claims to weave together the core teachings of various religions under the banner of a unified, esotericism. This was a point Bhaskar later reiterated, remarking:

The higher truth, known to the esoteric, sees all religions as so many different paths to the absolute; the ordinary truth, which is what the masses believe, proclaims a monopoly of truth. The higher truth is actually present as a lived reality in most of the major religious traditions and practices: in Judaism you have Kaballah; in Christianity you had the mystics and latterly you have the varieties of liberation and some liberal, postmodern and (recently) critical realist theology, and so on.

(Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 151)

Again, we have idea of a higher, esoteric, secret truth as mystical path behind a diversity of religions. Note also that Bhaskar concludes by suggesting that this same, higher, esoteric truth can be seen in Critical Realist theology.

In summary, while the interviews cited thus far were conducted later in his life, the quotes selected emphasise his early engagement with theosophy. This exploration has yet to touch upon his subsequent advocacy for specific spiritual practices, a theme that will be the focus of the following section. But before we move on, I want to underscore one implication

of the statements above, namely, that if Bhaskar basically conceived of Critical Realism by mapping theosophical accounts of religion onto the realm of science, then this means in his own discursive structure he is also effectively positioning Critical Realism itself as an “esoteric” philosophy of science.

Bhaskar’s Spiritual Turn

[Bhaskar] started out with a strong belief in science and ended up in the mystical waters beyond religion.

Frédéric Vandenberghe, *What’s Critical About Critical Realism?*
(2014)

By virtually any standard, Bhaskar’s *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul* (2000) stands out as an atypical work for a twenty-first-century academic philosopher, both in terms of its subject matter and genre. So it is perhaps understandable that this work seems to have convinced some of his followers that he had gone off the deep end. To explain, that Bhaskar underwent a so-called “spiritual turn” is uncontroversial. In a lecture for the Templeton Foundation in 2011, he even referred to his own trajectory as such. But most Critical Realists seem to have found Bhaskar’s shift embarrassing and the contents of that spiritual turn have rarely been discussed in any detail. This section will flesh out the details; and show how his spiritual turn was in certain senses a return to theosophical ideas.

In the interview with Hartwig, Bhaskar recounts an experience he had while vacationing in Cyprus in 1994. Feeling exhausted, he opted to try reiki healing and found an English woman living in Cyprus who practiced it. He describes the experience as transformative, saying it “put me in touch again” – note the word *again* – “with a deep inner world: what was happening, as it were in myself, behind – or rather in the deep uncharted interior of – the world of physical bodies and material objects.” Discovering that the reiki practitioner’s husband practiced transcendental meditation, Bhaskar chose to explore that as well. He reflected that transcendental meditation “reawakened me to things that I had been vaguely familiar with in my youth, and again I found this a very moving experience. I decided to undertake a systematic investigation into the forms, practical and theoretical, of what could be called eastern mysticism” (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 146). As this interview illustrates, Bhaskar interpreted his experiences in Cyprus as a return to his youth and thus, presumably, his theosophical background.

Bhaskar then reaffirmed a core aspect of his claim through a classical (and basically orientalist) binary, asserting,

western civilisation and science had been oriented to the understanding and mastery of the world external to us. Within the East ... in India, China, and the civilizations that grew up from them, there was some understanding of the inner world. The experience I had in Cyprus, or the sort of experiences that began in Cyprus, led me to refocus on this. (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 149)

Again, we have a notion of return, but it is couched in the language of a material West and spiritual East, which was, of course, a defining trope of theosophy.

Nonetheless, it took six years for Bhaskar's new spiritual focus to manifest in monograph form, and when it finally did, the impact was startling. Reviewing a chronological list of his earlier publications helps us grasp the extent of this disruption: *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975), *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979), *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1987), *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (1989), *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (1990), *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993), and *Plato, etc.: The Problems of Philosophy and Their Resolution* (1994). As these titles suggest, Bhaskar's prior focus was on advancing a science-centred Critical Realism, later applying his model to the social sciences, and ultimately to political theory – a trajectory that, until his spiritual turn, seems by contrast quite conventional.

In 2000, Bhaskar published *From East to West*. It is evident from the very first page that Bhaskar was doing something different. The book opens with the declaration, “The essential thesis of this book is that man is essentially God” and later expands: “On this philosophy the basic structure of both man and the world (of which man forms a part) is God; and man's essential task is to realise this transcendental or categorial fact” (Bhaskar 2000, ix). He goes on to suggest that “God, [is] an absolute but actualised ground of pure dispositionality [sic] which is also the ultimate categorial structure of the world, including man” (Bhaskar 2000, 3). In other words, the deep structure of the world and the human are both divine.

Nonetheless, Bhaskar is quick to reassure his readers that “nothing in this book involves the rejection of any existing (dialectical) critical realist position.” Instead, he argues that it reflects, “a new realism about transcendence and God” and “the nature and persistence of the self” (Bhaskar 2000, ix–x). As he elaborated in a later interview:

When you apply critical realism to the topic of God you have the possibility of a real breakthrough ... Of course, it follows from that that the object, if it is real, can be approached in different ways. The absolute or God - whichever you want to say - will manifest to different people

in different ways, and different people will have their own different preferred modes of access to it and their different interpretations of it.

(Bhaskar in conversation with Hartwig 2012, 194)

This is basically a return to theosophy. If you remember, I argued earlier that Bhaskar's original insight was to say about science what the theosophists had long said about religion, now he has merely reversed the operation to say about religion what theosophists have generally said about the topic. That is why I see the central shift in his so-called spiritual turn as a return.

This is also clear in the transposition of theosophical (in this case westernised Sanskrit) vocabulary back onto the terrain of Critical Realism. Let me provide another example. In the first significant subsection in the introduction to the work, "*Critical realism, the web of illusion and contemporary thought*" Bhaskar reframes the core insights of Critical Realism as the observation that "This chain of *avidya* [ignorance in Sanskrit] secretes a veil or veils, which together form an interlocking *web* or meshwork of *illusions* [glossed earlier as *maya*]," adding that "these alienations, contradictions and so on within thought and between thought and the reality it is about are to be explained in terms of the real alienations and contradictions at all four planes of social being" (Bhaskar 2000, 4–5). Here we have standard theosophical tropes about ignorance, illusion, and the capacity of those with esoteric insights to pierce the "veil" (think H.P. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*).

Nonetheless, this was not all that was strange about *From East to West*. We've only touched on the preface and first few pages of the introduction. The next thing a fresh reader would have been struck by would be its genre. Following a comprehensive theoretical introduction – where, notably, Bhaskar compares the core idea of Critical Realism to the *Bhagavad Gita* (Bhaskar 2000, 29) – the text transitions into a narrative mode. Primarily, it unfolds as a novella, chronicling Bhaskar's past lives: beginning with his soul's first birth during Moses's crossing of the Red Sea and then tracing 14 more rebirths until Bhaskar's then present life. Throughout these journeys, which take his soul from ancient Greece, Galilee, Kashmir, Japan, China, Tibet, India, Italy, France, and London, he encounters a series of spiritual teachers including Moses, Pythagoras, Buddha, and Jesus, among others.

Beyond the framing device of reincarnation, the resulting text is redolent with theosophical and esoteric tropes. The text contains discussions of the Theosophical Society (17, 147–148); references to the lost wonders of "Atlantian [sic] civilization" (13, see also 75, 80, 81, 94, 96–99, 112); opening his extrasensory "third eye" (16, 17, 73, 80, 121, 134, 147); as well as "the astral world" and "astral travel" (50, 76, 78, 98–99, 111–112). Just in his first life, Bhaskar tells us that from a young age

“his third eye is open and he is inspired by (visions of) angels and the visitations of enlightened masters and other holy beings ...” note the reference to “enlightened masters” a common theosophical trope, and that when “his psychic powers and intellectual and intuitive gifts are developing apace [Bhaskar himself] teachers [sic] the esoteric wisdom and occult sciences and arcane arts, including especially numerology and astrology” (73, 76).

Less we think that this is all meant to be in some sense allegorical, in a section explicitly market as a “theoretical,” Bhaskar discusses “the varieties of transcendent beings” in which includes not just God, but also “deities and avatars (manifestations and embodiments of God); and angels (aspects of God or the divine will)” (50). Here he seems to be describing a non-to-uncommon esoteric henotheism in which a singular absolute divinity then manifests as specific gods, avatars, and angels. He also suggests that “accessing God may be as either outer or inner. As a transcendent outer in religious practices or as a transcendental inner in meditation” (50). Paraphrased, while external religious practices are still important, it would seem that transcendental meditation does for the individual inner self what Bhaskar’s has earlier stated science does for reality – permit one to recover its ontological depths.

Tellingly, the language of stratification intrudes as he states:

There are aspects of the stratification of our being (such as our souls) not readily accessible to us. Then there are or may be subjects at very different levels of being; for example, there arise the possibilities of spirits at levels beyond embodiment but not manifest, or of, more subtle levels of embodiment, the denizens of the astral and causal worlds, including discarnate souls.

(50)

Here Bhaskar is suggesting that we have a kind of inaccessible noumena even within ourselves, but that what it makes way for is the existence of spirits, including ghosts (disincarnate souls) and dwellers in “the astral and causal worlds.” So we’ve got an ontology that includes: gods, ghosts, angels, avatars, and spirits.

Bhaskar then elaborates how developing psychic powers may someday allow the perception of previously imperceptible beings, since senses

developed clairvoyantly [are] a possibility implicit in the unfinished, open-ended evolution of our species, which encompasses the possibilities of the further development of our perceptual and moral (as well as our cognitive and technological) powers, (d) more generally developed by intuition, telepathy, the growth of paranormal or (otherwise put) the

possible liberation of perhaps normal psychic powers, or (e) developed through heterocosmic affinity and so on.

(50)

I take Bhaskar to be arguing that there are some possible subtle beings that are not perceptible now, but that such beings could be perceived through clairvoyance, intuition, telepathy, the expansion of paranormal abilities, or the unlocking of inherent psychic capabilities, as well as through a connection with different cosmic realities.

Another point of resonance between theosophy and Bhaskar's theory of science lies in their shared commitment to the notion of linear progress. Bhaskar asserted that evidence of science's validity derives from its capacity to make continuous advancement. He similarly expresses optimism regarding the development of spiritual capabilities. This is encapsulated in an insight he attributed to one of his previous lives, where he discusses the emergence of "clairvoyant powers [as] the opening up of natural intrinsic powers inherent (already inherent) in actually existing mankind, as part of the unfinished (including perceptual) evolution of the species" (112). This notion of spiritual evolution is well discussed aspect of modern theosophy (see Goodrick-Clarke 2011).

So, what conclusions can we draw from this wealth of material? The main point I wish to underscore is that Bhaskar's assertions constitute nothing less than a theosophical manifesto, steeped in distinctly New Age and esoteric themes. It could almost go without saying, but none of this is really mainstream Hinduism. Indeed, the text abounds with literal references to "the esoteric teachings of the perennial wisdom" (ibid., 13, 17, 75, 76, 97, 112, 113, 148). It also states, "The lives described are those which appear most immediately relevant to the fulfilment of the soul's intention: to bring perennial truth into the compass of an adventure story" (1). In describing his present incarnation, Bhaskar reveals that his goal is to present a "perennial philosophy for the new millennium which this very book initiates" that integrates "insights of the New Age and the New Left movements" (17, see also 148). Bhaskar is bluntly characterising Critical Realism, or at least his broader philosophical project, as a form of perennialism. As an example of esotericism and philosophy, the connection is unmistakably clear, requiring no interpretive leap.

Strikingly, Bhaskar concludes his work by reasserting that his philosophical venture aims to "reclaim and re-enchant reality" (5). This intent is further clarified in a subsequent interview, where he mentions his aspiration to author a book titled "Re-enchanting Reality" (Singh and Bhaskar 2020, 105). Although such a book was never published under that name, Bhaskar's vision took form in the 2002 monograph, *The Philosophy of MetaReality*. This philosophical treatise, while devoid of discussions of

his previous reincarnations is still immersed deeply into New Age themes, with chapters dedicated to Kabbala, Zen, the Tao of Love, Yoga, and Gnosis, among others. In this work, Bhaskar revisits the concept of “re-enchantment,” defined as: the collapse of the subject-object divide; the melding of fact and value; and recognition that “everything is sacred” (Bhaskar 2012, lxviii). Furthermore, he argues that:

The best way to hasten the evolution of matter, life and mind; and in particular of social forms (in what I have called four-planar social being, which must here be generalised, in accordance with expanded energetic and enchanted ontology). In this way it is the best, and probably the only way to the achievement of what I have called a eudaimonistic society, in which the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all; and it is also the best, and probably only, way to achieve theosis, or the goal of universal self-realisation.

(ibid 247)

In other words, Bhaskar is suggesting that “theosis” or unification with the divine is the most effective method to accelerate the evolution of matter, life, mind, and even social structures and thus to achieve a flourishing and free society. He is emphasising the capacity for self-realisation to produce “the re-enchantment of ontology [at various] levels of being” (Bhaskar 2012, 361). While space constraints preclude a detailed examination of this work, it is clear Bhaskar’s aims to re-enchanting reality and recoup theosophical insights, although they evolved, persisted until his death.

Conclusion

Philosophers have long celebrated our discipline’s capacity for rationalistic insight. When the discipline reconstructs itself as a project reinvigorated by René Descartes it can even seem that the central mission of philosophy is to work from doubt to certain knowledge by means of reason and by doing thus dispel the superstitions of a bygone age and mainstream culture alike. Esotericism might seem to epitomise the very superstitions and irrationalities philosophy was intended to dissipate. But this tale is itself an anachronism. Many an established philosopher has engaged with esoteric currents and found them to be inspirational.

In addition to those thinkers explored in other chapters of this edited volume, numerous other philosophers (or at least philosophically adjacent thinkers) have found something engaging in esotericism. For instance, Ferdinand de Saussure, known for his foundational work in linguistics, also participated in spiritualist séances and explored theosophy concurrently with delivering his influential lectures. Gilles Deleuze, a prominent

figure in French philosophy, made his entry into the literary world with an introduction to a book on occult magic. Giorgio Agamben sought insights from Paracelsus to address the semiotic rupture, viewing ancient mysticism as a bridge over modern divides in meaning. Peter Sloterdijk considered Osho not only a spiritual guide but also a precursor to his philosophical ideas. Luce Irigaray's exploration of yoga and mysticism infused her feminist philosophy with a spiritual dimension. Jacques Derrida, meanwhile, expressed interest in telepathy and sought to connect the concepts of the magician (*pharmakeus*), writing, and magic as counterparts to speech and logos. Other thinkers, such as Michel de Certeau, Georges Bataille, and Ernst Bloch, are renowned for their mystic inclinations and at least interest in esoteric topics (see Storm 2017, 238).

To be crystal clear, uncovering this history is neither meant to repudiate any given philosopher (although I am rather critical of so-called Critical Realism, I do not mean this account of Bhaskar's background as an *ad hominem*);³ much less is it meant to provide any evidence that would validate any particular claim associated with esotericism. Rather, what it shows is that what is often taken to be the occult fringe (or vestigial remnants of magical belief in an otherwise disenchanted world) has been much closer to the ordinary than has often been recognised. As the contemporary sociological evidence suggests, even people residing in North America and Western Europe today live in a cultural context in which such themes predominate (see Storm 2017, esp. 22–40).

That said, I am not denying that esoteric movements and views have ever been marginalised (see Hanegraaff 2012). Further evidence for this can actually be found within the movement of Critical Realism itself. Significant members of the movement – like Bhaskar's main champion Andrew Collier (see Collier 2003) and his key interlocutors in sociology Margaret Archer and Douglas Porpora (see Archer, Collier, Porpora ed 2004) also asserted that the foundational principles of Critical Realism were equally applicable to religious convictions as they are to the natural or social sciences. But because this work was largely undertaken in a broadly Christian theological frame, it has not attracted the degree of criticism that was directed towards Bhaskar's more explicitly New Age claims. Nonetheless, one might argue that it has still not been taken as seriously as it might have been either. Academic disciplines and their desire to distance themselves from esotericism is just but one example of a perceived need to stake out a distance from religious views and values more broadly, even as many of these persist in the private lives of various thinkers (and often as their central motivating interest).

Roy Bhaskar's project is but one late example of this larger pattern. (As Nietzsche reminds us, it is perhaps too easy to smuggle God into the noumena.) In this chapter, I have traced his intellectual trajectory to unveil the

deep interconnections between Critical Realism and theosophical esotericism. Bhaskar's attempt to bridge the chasm between scientific rigour and esoteric spirituality challenges the conventional boundaries that have long segregated history of philosophy and the study of esotericism. Philosophers and scholars of esotericism should thus pay heed to Bhaskar's work, not as an outlier, but as a pivotal case study that prompts a re-evaluation of the perceived place of esotericism in the history of philosophy. This case study thus underlines the critical need to acknowledge and examine the role of esoteric thought in significant philosophical and scientific movements, not merely as historical footnotes but as active elements that have contributed to their intellectual history. I think if we explore more widely and investigate more carefully, we'll find that many philosophers, scientists, and scholars have projects with historically unobserved theosophical depths.

Notes

- 1 To be clear, the relationship between the *noumena* and *Ding an sich* in Kant is somewhat controversial, but I'm treating them as loose synonyms for the purposes of describing Bhaskar's project.
- 2 I've elsewhere criticised his account of intransitivity, Storm (2021a, 31, 104).
- 3 I originally thought I would put my debate with the main philosophical claims of Critical Realism into this chapter, but it seems less connected to the theosophical material than I thought it might be. Still if pressed, I would say that the critical realist presupposition about the unity of science is false. As I, and a host of other critical philosophers of sciences have argued, science is not one thing. Thus, Bhaskar's original transcendental inquiry can be challenged. Interestingly, this is also my critique of theosophical accounts of "religion" too insofar as I would argue against the unity of religion. Still there are some critical realist claims, which I find useful.

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12 Materialising the Occult

Matter, Spirit, and Image in the Two Bergsons

John Ó Maoilearca

From the New Materialism to the Old New Spiritualism

It might be Quentin Meillassoux’s “mathemic” valorisation of contingency; the idea of “plasticity” in Catherine Malabou’s neurophilosophy; entanglement and quantum indeterminacy in Karen Barad’s philosophy of physics; or “vibrant matter” in Jane Bennett’s neo-vitalism – in each case of “new materialism” there is an implicit premise that whatever number of emergent, vital, and non-reducible properties are allowed to matter, the idea of spirit, psyche, or mind, cannot be added to the list. Yet, one can still rightfully ask whether this exclusion is justified by all accounts of the spiritual? As John Zammito writes: “one of the essentially contested issues surrounding the new materialism is how to conceive the relation of ‘spirit’ to the natural” (Zammito 2017, 309–10). This is why the possibility of a *non-Platonist* (or immanent) spirit or psyche is rarely, if ever, entertained. If mental terms are allowed, it is only tolerated in a materialised form found (supposedly) in certain forms of panpsychism. This makes it all the more apt when Adela Pinch states that modern-day “trends in the humanities that embrace panpsychism, vibrant matter, object-oriented ontologies, and extended or dispersed conceptions of consciousness, could benefit from an examination of Victorian debates about panpsychism” (Pinch 2014–15, 1).

And here is where a little more historical research may be of use when looking at such conceptual debates, in particular around the school of “French spiritualism”. This was a loose tradition of thought that lasted from the late 18th century up to Henri Bergson in the 20th century as its last and probably greatest representative. Despite its name, it was not a school of the occult, but what we might nowadays call a non-dualist, non-reductive approach to mind and body. These earlier French philosophers, including Maine de Biran (1766–1824), Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900), and Émile Boutroux (1845–1921), were equally determined to find a way in which matter and spirit could be thought together, but without turning

to either dualism or reductionism. The place of spirit was retained in their research through *movement, vitality, duration, and contingency*.

A recent work from Larry Sommer McGrath is even more illuminating in this regard. In *Making Spirit Matter: Neurology, Psychology, and Selfhood in Modern France*, Sommer McGrath writes that the spiritualism that emerged in France in the late 19th century was not like the spiritualism that went before – this was a “new spiritualism”, or at least it was significantly different from older varieties because it had taken a scientific, and even materialist turn (Sommer McGrath 2020, 10). As he reports on this particular reading of the issue: the new spiritualism “is not a new doctrine”, one author wrote in 1884; “it is spiritualism renewed by science”. The characterisation of this transformation as a turn to materialism took hold thanks to a critic of the movement. A defender of the old-guard decried what he saw as its abnegation in the form of “neo-materialism” (ibid.). For Sommer McGrath, this critic was actually right and a “materialist moment” had by then “inflected the spiritualist movement by the turn of the century”. Moreover, the chief protagonist of this turn, he contends, was Henri Bergson (1859–1941): “the thrust of his oeuvre, I argue, was to steer a materialized spiritualism into the twentieth century” (ibid.). Not only was Bergson the most “successful representative of the materialist turn in spiritualism”, according to Sommer McGrath, he led a movement that operated with much more “expansive notions of rationality, positivism, and materialism” (Sommer McGrath 2020, 13, 15–16). And here we see a clear dovetailing between this once “new”, turn-of-the-century spiritualism with what is new in our current new materialism, and it concerns a shared non-reductive approach to both matter and spirit:

The charge of “neo-materialism” was revelatory. The accused never ascribed the label to themselves; yet, it was hardly a misnomer. ... Unlike reductive materialisms, which conceptualized matter as the substratum and final explanation of spirit, this “neo-materialism” – and its leading practitioner, Henri Bergson – reimagined matter to enter into a partnership with the spiritual powers of memory, creativity, and action. (Ibid.)

Sommer McGrath is not alone in his more ecumenical interpretation of the spirit-matter relations at play amongst these thinkers. Jeremy Dunham writes that the “new spiritualists”, were “inspired by developments in the life sciences [and] developed a theory of nature as open, creative, and evolving” (Dunham 2020, 988; 1005). Mark Sinclair and Delphine Antoine-Mahut have argued that “spiritualism in the first half of the [19th] century should be seen as a plural and open-ended development

of a programme rather than as the reproduction of a one-track thought”, and even that we “have to reject as simplistic and superficial standard characterizations of positivism and spiritualism as diametrically opposed” (Sinclair and Antoine-Mahut 2020, 862–863). And to round out these new, revisionist histories, we can also turn to Jean Gayon, who even argues that:

Bergson was a “spiritualistic positivist”. This is not retrospective interpretation, something that I would formulate because it sounds like a nice paradox. It is the plain expression of the historical fact. Around 1900, “spiritualistic positivism” was the current name of a living tradition among certain French philosophers, such as Jules Lachelier or Émile Boutroux. Like Bergson, who was directly influenced by them, they emphasized a conception of the mind founded on spontaneity, contingency and indeterminism.

(Gayon 2005, 47)

What we see, then, is a clear convergence between the flight of new materialism away from the old materialism – a flight that was inflected by properties also associated with spirit (creativity and contingency) – and the flight of the new spiritualism away from its older forebear, whose own route was modified by elements from material science. So, instead of talking of matter *or* spirit, we might speak alternatively in terms of continua, of contingency, creativity, and vitality.

Images and Imagination

Mina Bergson (1865–1928), a.k.a. Moina Mathers (or Moina Bergson Mathers), was an occultist and mystic, skryer, astral traveller, and image-maker. She was at the height of her powers in the 1890s, running an important occult society (The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn), producing mystical artwork, and, by the end of the decade, practising the Egyptian mysteries of Isis in Parisian theatres. She was also the younger sister of the French spiritualist philosophy Henri Bergson. Indeed, her occultist practices were occurring in Paris at precisely the same time that her brother Henri was writing *Matter and Memory* and later invested as Professor of Classical Philosophy at the Collège de France. By this time, Henri was already a leading figure within the French academy, his theory of *durée* (or real time) eventually making him the most renowned European philosopher in the first years of the following century. Mina was his allegedly estranged sister, though in her own right already celebrated as a feminist and occultist. For our purposes, what is most significant is that brother and sister were living in Paris and working simultaneously on very

different yet still complementary approaches to questions concerning the nature of matter, spirit, and their interaction.

Mina's organisation, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a Victorian occult group that lasted, in various forms, for 50 years, with practices derived from the Jewish mystic system of the Kabbalah, the Tarot, and other "various sources". Together with her husband, Samuel McGregor Mathers and other members of the Golden Dawn, they used "incantations and rituals ... some genuinely ancient and associated with the historic Rosicrucian movement, some ostensibly archaic but in fact of very recent concoction" (Armstrong 1975, 37–38). In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that, in the practices of The Golden Dawn, one can find an immanent philosophy concerning embodiment, imagination and what Mina called the "spiritualization" of the material, that greatly complements that "neo-materialist" spiritualism of her brother's philosophy of time. Though any influence Mina might have had on Henri's work (or he on hers) remains completely undocumented, she, like him, believed that a concordance was beginning to emerge between natural science and (mystic) spiritualism at the turn of the 20th century. As she wrote in 1926:

Material science would appear to be spiritualizing itself and occult science to be materializing itself The Ancient Wisdom, the Sacred Books, taught that we cannot understand Matter without understanding Spirit, that we cannot understand Spirit without understanding Matter. That Matter and Spirit are only opposite poles of the same universal substance.

(Bergson/Mathers 2016a, viii)

Yet it is on the subject of imagination and the image where the two Bergsons converge most dramatically. In particular, it is with the image as immanent creation, not something formed *ex nihilo* from a transcendent, pure nothing, but through the artistic imagination's engagement with the Real, that the correspondences are most interesting. For Mina and the Golden Dawn, imagination was not fanciful invention but the principled use of a cognitive tool, imagination as a kind of seeing. Hence, Mina's use of ceremonial vault design, Tattwa cards, or other diagrammatic imagery, should be examined in the context of the esoteric idea that an image is not imaginary (or merely representational) – but part of a perfectible process that can be "attuned" and "allayed" to the Real. As Mina writes:

imagination (*eidolon*) means the faculty of building an image. The imagination of the artist must lie in the power, which he possesses more

or less in proportion to his sincerity, and his intuition, of perceiving forces in the macrocosm, and allying or attuning himself thereto, his talents naturally and his artificial training permitting him to formulate images which shall express those forces.

(Ibid.)

Imagination is not merely the (fanciful) representation of reality, but an immanent part of the Real, a microcosm that more or less instantiates the macrocosm. Mina's duality of orientation over a dualism of substance is also highly reminiscent of the opening of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* of 1896:

We will assume for the moment that we know nothing of theories of matter and theories of spirit, nothing of the discussions as to the reality or ideality of the external world. Here I am *in the presence of images*, in the vaguest sense of the word, images perceived when my senses are opened to them, unperceived when they are closed.

(Bergson 1990, 17, my emphasis)

Instead of a dichotomised matter and spirit, for Henri, there is a unity within a universal imagery. And in 1907, when Henri begins the third chapter of *Creative Evolution* with an attempt to explain the seemingly mysterious correlations between intellect and materiality, he will propose that the two "are derived from a wider and higher form of existence" and that it must have been the one process that "cut out matter and the intellect, at the same time, from a stuff [*éttoffe*] that contained both" (Bergson 1911a, 197, 210). Mina's "universal substance" again.

Henri's notion that the image is real, a kind of material even, is pivotal to his theory of time, matter, and spirit. Significantly, this most radical text, *Matter and Memory*, begins with images in its first chapter, with an ontology of images that reflect and refract each other. And in this text, the relationship of the image to the Real is clearly not one of representation, but that of immanent participation: it is a mereological relation of part to whole, microcosm to macrocosm, one of degrees:

Between this perception of matter and matter itself there is but a difference of degree and not of kind ... the relation of the part to the whole. ... My consciousness of matter is no longer either subjective ... or relative ... It is not subjective, for it is in things rather than in me. It is not relative, because the relation between "phenomenon" and the "thing" is *not that of appearance to reality*, but merely that of the *part to the whole*.

(Bergson 1990, 17, 230)¹

Pure perception is *in* the image itself. Only when images refract each other is this pure perception delimited, narrowed, to become “subjective representation” – but even then, it is still a part of the image, immanent to it. The material world does not stand apart from my consciousness, but nor is it in my consciousness as any kind of correlate like an idea: rather, consciousness (“of” matter) can be understood as really *in* matter (immanence), only not as a reduction of mind but through the *temporalisation* of matter. Matter and spirit meet as forms of time (or “*durée*”). The spiritualisation of matter and the materialisation of spirit are temporal modalities, different rhythms of *durée*, of time.

Realism Towards the Past

Such “rhythms of time” should give us pause, moreover, because matter, spirit, and image are all connected through *time* in both the Bergsons. To see how this might be so, however, we must first ask the question of the purpose of such Orders as the Golden Dawn – what did they do and why? This simple description from Christopher Armstrong provides an initial answer: “the acquisition of a certain ‘gnosis’ or private experiential contact with ultimate realities through the deliberate deployment of incantations and rituals, drawn from various sources, some genuinely ancient and associated with the historic Rosicrucian movement, some ostensibly archaic but in fact of very recent concoction” (Armstrong 1975, 37–38). *Pace* Armstrong’s jibe about “concoction” by the Golden Dawn, their public performances were never intended to be historically accurate. They were creative and artistic invocations – a “performance art”, according to Denisoff, with ceremonies that were, as Frederic Lees described them at the time, “artistic in the extreme” (Denisoff 2019; Lees 1900). Performed at the Théâtre La Bodinière and other secret locations in Paris, Mina Bergson, dressed as high priestess Anari, would invoke the goddess Isis materially, immanently, and in person. (Parenthetically, whereas an *evocation* in Enochian magic brings a spirit into the world as a separate entity, in an *invocation* the spirit is channelled by the medium into another body, her own being a common choice for such embodiment: she is not a means of communication so much as an incarnation of spirit, a moving conduit that, as we will see, works through mimetic performance as well as symbolism.²) Isis, who is first recorded c.2350–2100 BCE, is the Egyptian goddess of life, the all-encompassing mother, a moon goddess, as well as the goddess of nourishment, healing, and magic (in the Osiris Myth, she brings her brother, Osiris, partially back from the dead).³ So important for the Golden Dawn were these Isis rites, moreover, that after 1900 Samuel and Mina would refer to all their work as part of the “Isis movement”.⁴ Occult Invocation as practiced by Mina and the

Golden Dawn, then, was a performative embodiment of the past, a past that remains real, that survives through living movement.

In a lecture given in Paris on “The Soul and the Body”, Henri Bergson gave a talk on the mind-body problem that attempts to conceptualise their non-duality through a rethinking of time, in particular, our false (for him) understanding of past and present as separable dimensions. He first points out that any ability to comprehend the present – such as the sentence he is currently enunciating – requires the immanence of the past within the present, that is, the now-gone beginning of the sentence must somehow persist in the present to allow one’s comprehension of the sentence as a whole. He then asked his audience to imagine a single sentence “lasting for years”. “Well”, he continued, “I believe that our whole psychological existence is something just like this single sentence, continued since the first awakening of consciousness, interspersed with commas, but never broken by full stops. And consequently, I believe that our whole past still exists” (Bergson 1975, 69–70).

Our attention to a sentence or any other temporally extended phenomenon requires an elasticity of attention that keeps past and present immanent to each other. In extending this attention (by whatever means) “*what we call our past*” is embraced within what we call our “present”. The former distends the latter. So far, so “merely” psychological, perhaps. Yet Bergson seems to hedge his bets between psychology and ontology by remaining unclear as to what is being maintained here – my past as I remember it, or *the* past itself. Ordinarily, we would say that there is a major difference between the two, yet Bergson invariably fails to make the distinction, speaking interchangeably about “my past”, “memory”, and “the past” (Bergson 1911a, 5–6).⁵ On one page of his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, for instance, he writes that “the piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation”, only then to say on the next page that “it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act”, and later again that “from this survival of the past it follows that consciousness cannot go through the same state twice” (Bergson 1911a, 5).⁶ So, though it is I who actively remembers from the present moment, what returns is not a recollection, but the past in which I reside (my past is the past). As such, attention is a kind of time-machine for Bergson. Indeed, one might even say that each of us suffers from some degree of attention deficit disorder, only it is one which is species-specific, with (perhaps) only a few artists, mystics, or so-called madmen being less “disordered” than the rest of us.

Ultimately, most commentators agree on this one point as regards Bergson’s theory of memory – for him the past is a real agent, alive and kicking, in one form or another: “it is we who are in time, rather than time that is in us” (Grosz); “we are not ‘in’ time, in the manner that

objects occupy parts of space. *We are* time, unfolding at different speeds” (Khandker); “rather than conceiving of memory as a way of relating to the past from the perspective of the present, Bergson regularly equates memory with the totality of one’s past as it is preserved in itself” (Perri); “the past is not in the past but in a present which exists virtually and which lies below and beyond the time of adaptation” (Mourélos) (Grosz 2005, 3; Khandker 2020, 85; Perri 2017, 510 [citing François 2008, 30]; Mourélos 1964, 136). Nicolas de Warren calls all this “Bergson’s Copernican Revolution” whereby consciousness as a whole does not move from the present to the past, but “from the past to the present, from memory to perception” (de Warren 2015, 247).⁷ In sum, though dressed in the garb of respectable metaphysics, Bergson’s thesis is at least as radical, esoteric, and challenging as the practices of invocation taught and performed by his sister as part of a hermetic, occultist order, the Golden Dawn.

On the Image and the Real

Within the Hermetic/esoteric context that we are discussing, images and the making of images through special use of the imagination, gain great power, taking the image well beyond any unreal representational interpretation. For practitioners within the Golden Dawn, for instance, imagination is not a faculty of the non-existent – *it has its own reality*. As Tanya Luhrmann reports, the doctrine of the Golden Dawn explicitly stated that “imagination was a reality and that it could affect the material world. The different ‘plane’ that these magical writers present is not defined by different rules – that conception emerges somewhat later – but is rather composed of different *materials*, one apparently unsubstantial, the other substantive, but both ultimately interdependent” (Luhrmann 1991, 876). Indeed, one of the Golden Dawn’s teaching texts, “Some Thoughts on the Imagination”, resolutely states:

The uninitiated interpret Imagination as something “imaginary”, in the popular sense of the word; i.e. something unreal. But imagination is a reality. When a man imagines he actually creates a form on the Astral or even on some higher plane; and this form is as real and objective to intelligent beings on that plane, as our earthly surroundings are to us.

(Resurgam 1987, 47)

Luhrmann helpfully expands on this claim by explaining how these practitioners “use a term like ‘plane’ to confer a separate but equal status upon this imaginative world. They also speak of the ‘inner plane’ and shorten the phrase to ‘the inner’. ‘Inner’ is a disingenuous term. It does not mean ‘merely’ imaginative or emotional or internal” (Luhrmann

1991, 857–858). Hence, the “visualisation” of abstract shapes such as a hexagram, say, is a crucial initial phase of occult practices such as astral projection. The inner, the imaginative, is fabricated *and* real. This realisation of the imagination is one of the ways, according to Alison Butler, that the Golden Dawn revolutionised the Victorian practice of magic: it introduced the “dominance of the imagination and the will in the magical process”. Moreover, the magic rituals were now controlled, not only by “the magician’s will and imagination”, but were so directed without intermediary (Butler 2011, 155, 157).

Contemporary research in Western esotericism has maintained this call to see in the psychology of imagination more than is allowed by an “overly rational bias”. Wouter Hanegraaff, for instance, cites Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, the pioneers of “blending” theory, stating that “the next step in the study of mind is the scientific study of the nature and mechanisms of the imagination” (Hanegraaff 2020, 78). In a further turn towards scientific naturalism in this area, Egil Asprem has even analysed Mina Bergson’s descriptions of scrying and astral projection as a practice of extra-mundane imagination that was earnest in its methods of verification and error-elimination. He shows in some detail how she used “test symbols” taken from a “vast system of correspondences” whereby a vision could be carefully checked for its authenticity, in particular against the possibility that it was “only taken from memory or constructed by one’s own mental creativity” (Asprem 2008, 159). (The tacit differentiation here between real imagination and merely imaginary imagination, is telling.) Indeed, Asprem and others see strong potential for a *cognitivist* turn in esotericism research that would investigate “kataphatic”, or image-based, practices of the Golden Dawn (like clairvoyance and astral travel for example) in terms of “shifting attention to specific (internal and external) sensory cues”, or as after-image effects caused by the “physiology of the human eye combined with the brain’s strategy for interpreting sense data” (Asprem 2017; Asprem and Davidsen 2017, 8).

Imagination, then, or “the faculty of building an image” as we heard Mina Bergson put it, is a creative tool that the occult practitioner uses with trained skill (Bergson/Mathers 2016b, n17). When she discusses Tattwa cards revealing the “spirit of water”, or “Akas of Apas”, the images of each are no mere pictures – they are implements as well – see Figure 12.1. The image for “Akas” is a black or indigo egg, and for “Apas” a silver crescent. These images or thought-pictures, produced on Tattwa cards, could be used for a number of occult practices. As Joscelyn Godwin explains in “Esoteric Theories of Color” the use of flashing colours such as on Tattwa cards employed



Figure 12.1 “Akas of Apas” Tattwa Cards.

Source: Illustration by the author

“a physiological phenomenon, in which the eye projects a color that is not there, to create an imaginal situation. The purpose is to enter a realm where vision operates without a physical substratum. Such things happen in dream and drug experiences, but the object of the Golden Dawn’s, as of most initiatic training, was to enter such states voluntarily and to control them.

(Godwin 2017, 467)

Scrying more often than not begins with *real reflective surfaces*. Hence, the Tattwa card acts as a *kind* of mirror. As Mina Bergson writes, it allows the practitioner to perceive:

Some scene in the universe reflected in the symbol which you hold, this latter being to you as a mirror which shall reflect to you some scenes not within your range of sight. And secondly, you can continue the operation by using the same symbol, and by passing through it project yourself to the scene in question, which before you had only perceived as a reflection.

(Bergson/Mathers 2016b)

In other words, the Tattwa vision is a form of virtual image. She continues: “you must be prepared to receive impressions of scenes, forms, and sounds as vivid thought forms”. Such “thought forms” are not only visual, though, but involve complete “experiences”, that is, “things heard, things felt, as well as things seen, which would prove that the qualities that we are here using are really the sublimated senses”. This material “crystallizes the astral plane and completes it”.

The image is not “imaginary” remember, and there is almost a quasi-synaesthesia of images being employed here, one that defragments our separate sensory modalities. When neuroscience argues that synaesthesia could be an example of “human vestigiality” (reflecting a phase of brain development prior to its evolution into specialised sensory functions), then synaesthetes themselves become vestiges of our neurological past – living embodiments of the “spiritual in art” (as Wassily Kandinsky put it) or the art in spiritualism (seen in members of the Golden Dawn and their practices).⁸ A “spiritual synaesthesia” might even be something non-synaesthetes could acquire through Golden Dawn’s training methods: operating on the plasticity of mind and brain to re-integrate separate images into a more holistic, *attentive* perception. Indeed, in what could almost be Mina Bergson’s invocation of Gottfried Leibniz’ notion that each monad’s perception is a more or less confused image of the entire universe (a reference Henri Bergson was fond of making), she adds that these “insignia and implements” embody “a perfect representation of the universe” (Bergson/Mathers 2016b). The ritual implement, such as a sistrum for example, is a monad too no less than each image of the universe in *Matter and Memory*’s first chapter is also a monad.⁹

Of Diagrams

Matter and Memory is in many ways Henri Bergson’s strangest book. It is also his most graphical, being by far the most illustrated with diagrammatic images. The two most famous diagrams from it are these:

The diagram on the next page (Figure 12.2): is of the “circles of (expanded) memory” (A, B, C ...), reflected in the “deeper strata of reality” (A, B, C ...). The inverted cone image beneath it (Figure 12.3) is one of two variants appearing in *Matter and Memory*’s third chapter titled, “Of the Survival of Images”. The base of the inverted cone, A, B, represents the virtual plane of pure memory, understood as the persisting past itself. Memory operates first through a relocation upward, moving away from the base P (the “plane of perception”) and towards the summit, A, B, before then redescending down towards the point S on P. The summit is also the “place” where images survive – as if images could live, die, and return. In truth, they do not die so much as fall into a disregard.

The diagrams found in the grimoire of the Golden Dawn are clearly embedded within a very different network of mystical references and practices. Nonetheless, though they do not offer us a stand-alone philosophy (unless we take their practices *as* philosophy), they do evoke many continuities with Bergson’s diagrams in *Matter and Memory*.¹⁰

The image on the following page (Figure 12.4) is the “Connection Between the Worlds” of *Malkuth* and *Kether*. Matter and spirit. *Malkuth* (מלכות),

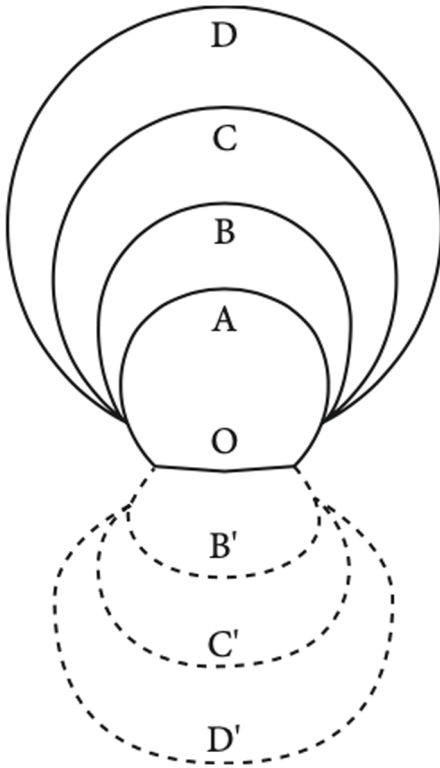


Figure 12.2 Circles of Expanded Memory.

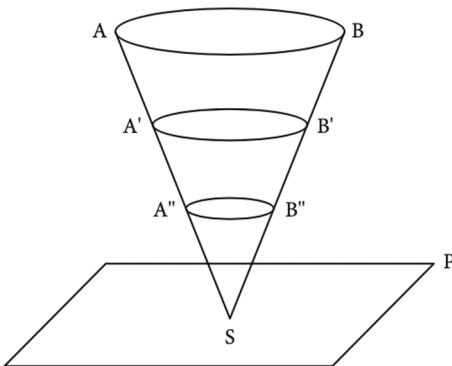


Figure 12.3 Cone of Memory.

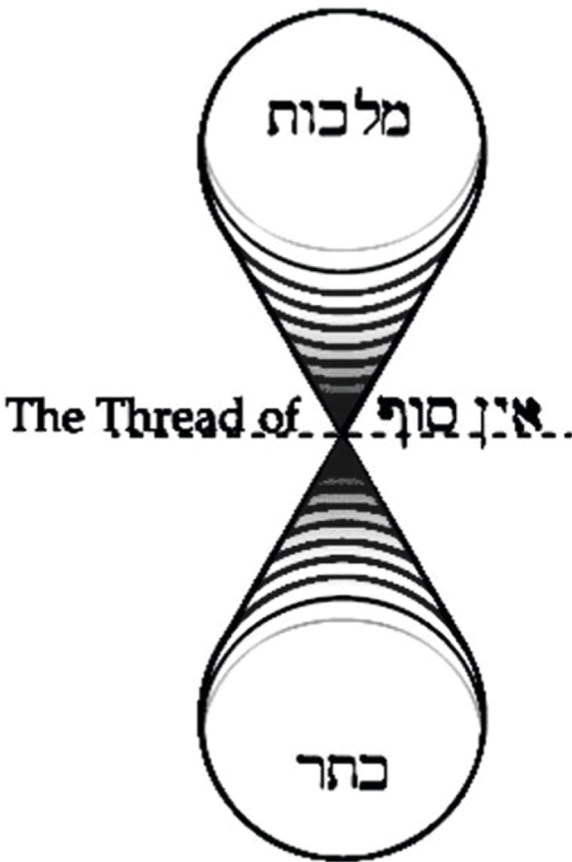


Figure 12.4 Connection Between the Worlds.

drawn top, is the most “material” emanation from the Infinite or “*Ein Sof*” (אֵין סוּף). *Kether* (כֶּתֶר), shown bottom, is the closest or most direct to *Ein Sof* of any order of manifestation. Note that its orientation is inverse to the Tree of Life, where *Malkuth* is at the base, *Kether* at the summit. The final image (Figure 12.5), the Tree of Life itself, leaves even less to the comparative imagination. The Tree of Life was a hermetic diagram popularised by the Golden Dawn that structured both divine reality as well as our mortal position within it, and knowledge of it. It is composed of ten spheres (“*Sephiroth*”), with each sphere (*Sephirah*) denoting a divine or universal quality, an emanation of God, but also possessing specific attributes of angels, angelic orders, or astrological correlates. They

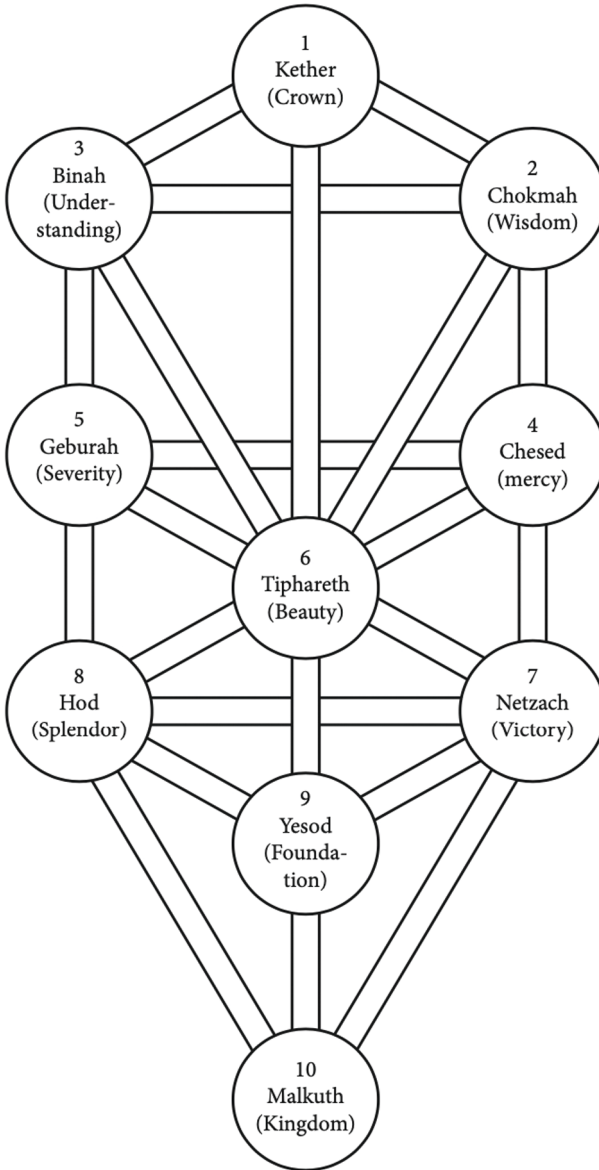


Figure 12.5 The Tree of Life.

are arrayed according to these orders, ranked in terms of immediacy to the highest divine quality, with *Kether* utmost at the top. Every aspect of an adept's training is to allow him or her to progress from the base to the summit.

Such a montage collision of diagrammatic images proves little, of course, but the logic of imagery is not deductive nor even inductive, but perspicuous and suggestive. These figures do not establish any sure lineage – they are just lines after all – and so they do not prove influence (be that proof through logical argument or empirical evidence). But their display is not about influence. What it does demonstrate (show) are visual echoes, covarying images, that, circumstantial though they are, help to *complete a picture in our imagination*.

Kinds of Perception

The image is not imaginary – it is a form of seeing. In his 1907 opus, *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson goes so far as to say that “the duty of philosophy should be to intervene here actively, to examine the living without any reservation as to practical utility ... Its own special object is to speculate, that is to say, to see” (Bergson 1911 206–07). Indeed, how far one can see, not only through philosophy but also more “paranormal” methods, was of great concern for Bergson too. The title of his 1913 address to the Society for Psychical Research was “Phantasms of the Living and Psychical Research” where he discusses a case of apparent telepathy. It concerns a woman who claimed to perceive (not merely sense) in every detail the death of her husband, a military officer, who was killed on a battlefield a great distance away: “At the very moment when the husband fell, the wife had the vision of the scene, a clear vision, in all points conformable to the reality”. What is really fascinating is that Bergson sidesteps the debate between whether this was a case of telepathy or clairvoyance on her part as follows: “If the picture was the reproduction of a real scene, it must, by every necessity, be because she perceived that scene or was in communication with a consciousness that perceived it” (Bergson 1975, 82, 85). Significantly, it is still a matter of *perception* (seeing) here for Bergson because of the *concrete details in her record* of the death scene, even though it was operating through some form of “*communication*” (this is not mind-reading). Bergson refers to this case as explicitly offering “the possibility of perceiving objects and events which our senses, with all the aid which instruments can bring them, are incapable of attaining” (Bergson 1975, 86).

This will sound odd to many: how can we perceive without sensing, how can there be, as he then puts it, a “veridical hallucination” such as this? Normally, we might entertain the idea that we can sense things without

noticing them, without perceiving them (“subliminally” shall we say). Yet Bergson has got it the other way around: perception is wider than sensation, for sensation is a narrowing or restriction of perception. One might conclude that he is simply referring to extra-sensory perception here, were it not that his philosophy has never been one that wishes to transcend the body and its powers (as many philosophers frequently do), but rather enhance them (and expand attention, too). Instead of an attempt to escape perception, Bergson elsewhere speculates on what might result were we to “return to perception, getting it to expand and extend”. Perhaps, he suggests: “Instead of trying to rise above our perception of things we were to plunge into it for the purpose of deepening and widening it. Suppose that we were to insert our will into it, and that this will, expanding, were to expand our vision of things” (Bergson 1992, 134).

And, as we saw, *Matter and Memory* offers a model of such perception which is only different from sensation by degree, as part is to whole. Moreover, it is not that perception is built upon the priority of the senses; rather, the senses are an a posteriori narrowing of, or selection from, this “pure” perception. A *perception that is more powerful than our senses – or a percept that is more than a sense*: this is the hypothesis that the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* calls “pure perception” – a kind of Leibnizian, monadic perception that mirrors the entire universe of images with varying degrees of attentiveness (or refraction).

In fact, it may well have already struck those readers with an interest in psychic phenomena that Bergson’s analysis of the case of the dying officer above is neither one of standard telepathic nor clairvoyant power: when Bergson says that “*she* perceived that scene”, it advances the prospect of something far more occult – that this was a case of spontaneous *astral projection*, what Mina Bergson describes as “travelling in spirit vision”. As explained in Mina Bergson’s own discussions of “scrying” (a type of spiritual seeing), or demonstrated in her practice of “Tattva visions”, the importance of imagery (“thought-pictures”) to astral projection, astral clairvoyance, or travelling in “spirit vision”, is perspicuous. *These images are fundamentally actual and specific in form*. *Tattva* is a Sanskrit word meaning “thatness”, “principle”, “reality”, or “truth”. It is to hermetic spiritualism what both “*logos*” (word, form, logic) and “*haecceity*” (thisness) are to Western philosophy. For both the Bergsons, the mystic and the philosopher, imagination is not imaginary. It is a kind of perception, an instrument of seeing, of attention.

Macro and Micro Planes

Discussing the supposed primacy of matter in the “new materialism”, Christopher Gamble, Joshua Hanan and Thomas Nail argue that:

It is not enough merely to say that everything is matter. This amounts to saying everything that is is. For us, there is “nothing but matter”, but unlike old materialisms this is not a reductionistic claim because matter is not a substance that everything can be reduced to. Matter, for us, is a fundamentally indeterminate performance or process-in-motion.

(Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019, 125)

Yet, Gamble, Hanan, and Nail’s notion of “process-in-motion” can cut both ways: in *Creative Evolution* Bergson defines spirit as follows: “We understand by spirituality a progress to ever new creations, to conclusions incommensurable with the premises and indeterminable by relation to them” (Bergson 1911, 232). In this light we could call spirit “creation-in-progress” – a nesting of processes, small and large, that operate temporally, that is, as covarying vitalities rather than as substances containing each other. Spiritual lives are defined and placed, therefore, on the same continuum as material lives, differing (if at all) only in their temporal scale.

In “Philosophical Intuition” (1911), Henri Bergson says this: “the matter and life which fill the world are equally within us, the forces which work in all things we feel within ourselves; whatever may be the inner essence of what is and what is done, we are of that essence” (Bergson 1992, 124). Mina Bergson, in her text “Know Thyself” states as follows:

The God of the Macrocosm only reflects Himself to Man through the God of Man’s Microcosm. ... hence the great assistance given to us in the teachings of our Order which insist on a careful study of the Kingdoms of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm side by side with our Spiritual Development, one study helping the other; in fact the two are almost inseparable.

(Bergson/Mathers 1987, 151–152)

Microcosm and macrocosm. One of the key principles of Hermeticism is that of “As above, so below”. This is the idea that earthly events reflect those occurring on an astral plane by means of correspondences and attunements. As we recall, Mina Bergson describes how:

The imagination of the artist must lie in the power, which he possesses more or less in proportion to his sincerity, and his intuition, of perceiving forces *in the macrocosm*, and allying or attuning himself thereto, his talents naturally and his artificial training permitting him to formulate images which shall express those forces.

(Bergson/Mathers 2016a, n17)

As regards levels, in Daniël Van Egmond's analysis of the systematic "correlations between the macrocosm and the microcosm", he describes how the occultist was able to explore "the various dimensions of the astral plane so as to change his or her own inner structure and to enable him or her to mediate divine influences to the world" (Van Egmond 1997, 332). The divine is immanent to the human. Obviously, this can be turned on its head, as Ludwig Feuerbach does by reducing God to a human projection of our species' perfection ("as below, so above", as it were). Beyond the religionist or anti-religionist commitments of theism or atheism, however, in secular terms we can say that the occultist's spatial model removes the need to transcend oneself in unity with the "above" because each human can already ally or attune him or herself with the Real in the "below". The self is remoulded, not annihilated.

Sometimes the esoteric homologies between macroscopic and microscopic employed obvious anthropomorphism (the sun and moon as eyes, the moon as breast, the sun as face, and so on).¹¹ Yet, as Joscelyn Godwin notes, these doctrines of correspondences, complements, or analogies were not just between polarities of large and small, human and divine – they also existed between elemental colours and sound, colours and elements, or colours, letters, and shapes (see Godwin 2017). And indeed, Mina Bergson's own "allying and attuning" would seem to denote quasi-physical images of connection: an "alliance" is a *binding* (from *alligare*, "to bind"), while an attunement is a tension or stretching (from *teinein*, "to stretch"). In each image, a material connection, binding and tensile, is formed between micro- and macro-levels, a physico-spiritual amalgam that is both unifying and multi-layered. Writing about the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Joshua Ramey explains its teaching that "materiality and spirituality are profoundly united", with life itself being a process in which "the nature of the divine is both discovered and produced in an unfolding of personal and cosmic, evolutionary and historical time. This is the meaning of 'As above, so below': the process of natural life as a 'manifestation of encosmic divinity'" (Ramey 2012, 3).¹²

Nonetheless, lest we fall foul of Sigmund Freud's notion of a quasi-mystical "oceanic feeling" – the infantile (and subsequently neurotic) sensation of a bond between oneself and the world – we should note that this divine immanence of micro and macro is not of a *static* unity but multiple, moving ones. Significantly, Henri Bergson's *non*-reductive temporal naturalism is not guilty of any reduction to or union with the One or any other *arché*, be it material or abstract. And, just as Henri Bergson in "Introduction to Metaphysics" tries to think unity and multiplicity *together* in the images of *durée*, so Mina Bergson, when thinking of the divine as either "single" or a plural set of "Forces" (in her introductory

text of 1926 to her husband's *Kabbalah Unveiled*), writes of "a plurality whose action is unified, an unity whose action is pluralised" (Bergson/Mathers 2016c, x).¹³

We might say that the centre is "decentred" through a proliferation of centres: a form of flattened ontology is installed with no unsurpassable hierarchy of macro over micro (at least in principle) – there is movement between levels. All the same, with any fabulation of minds beyond our own, spiritual, psychical, divine, or otherwise, such proliferations should be treated cautiously: attributing powers at the wrong scale, irrespective of the equalities of Macrocosm and Microcosm, can lead to delusions of voluntarism and control (what cognitivists call "Hyperactive Agency Detection"). Moreover, this type of Renaissance "episteme", one governed by a relation of *analogy* between every level of nature, above and below, need not be seen simplistically as *only* spatial, despite the language used to describe it. Much of the puzzling nature of scale and composition can be tempered, in fact, when we think of it in terms of *time*. The relations between parts and wholes, mereology in other words, must be thoroughly *temporalised* (for example: by temporalising scale in terms of rhythm, say, or in the language of memory).¹⁴

Conclusion: A Tale of Two Bergsons

Revisiting Henri Bergson's theories in search of certain "spiritualist" and even mystical underpinnings (that coincide with some of his sister's practices), is far from a novel type of enterprise in the history of ideas. Be it one within a philosophical lineage (G.W.F. Hegel's Gnosticism, Gilles Deleuze's post-Kantian esotericism, or the mystical sources of existentialism, say), or a scientific one (Newton and alchemy, for instance), looking for such reflections in a dark mirror is not an uncommon form of investigation.¹⁵ All the same, as Joshua Ramey cautions us, there remains a "contemporary ambivalence over the validity and significance of esoteric, let alone 'occult', apprehensions of nature and mind" such that a certain "political risk" comes with any such reading, especially in the face of the materialist worldview that currently dominates philosophy and "theory" in general. If the risk is worth taking, therefore, it is, as Ramey says, because the "marginalization of hermetic traditions ... constitutes a symptomatic repression of the complexity of both the history of modern philosophy and the stakes of contemporary culture, which is, from the internet to the cinema, completely obsessed with magic and with the occult" (Ramey 2012, 10). So, as Henri Bergson is increasingly being enfolded within the history of philosophy as a known quantity, a domesticated figure with a few peculiar views in the philosophy of mind and metaphysics of time, it remains important to remind ourselves of just

how radical and even esoteric many of his ideas were and remain, even today. A comparative analysis of these views with those of his nearest relative, a person who was practicing her occultist doctrines with many esoteric ideas in exactly the same place and time when Henri's strangest ideas were emerging, is as good a place as any to begin to fathom the nature of this strangeness.

It is in *Creative Evolution* that Henri Bergson offers an *orientational* reading of life and matter, a duality of direction – “*le physique soit simplement du psychique inversé*”. The physical is simply the psychological, inverted (see Canguilhem 1943). Indeed, Georges Canguilhem once redubbed *Creative Evolution* as equally a theory of the “*élan matérielle*” were one simply to invert (but not in any way dismiss) its arguments.¹⁶ Obvious wordplay aside, these inversions do capture something of the Mina-Henri bifurcation, one of methods and materials (mysticism/philosophy, spiritualism/science) dovetailing from different “poles” of the one “substance” (which is not a substance but a movement). This would offer a shared vision of life and world united through temporality, the one operating performatively to invoke and embody parts of the past directly in the person of the priestess; the other operating conceptually to explain my past as immanent within a set of “larger”, stratified presents, accessed through an expansion of attention. The difference is one of orientation.

Mina Bergson came from a respectable family and had a very famous, and very respectable, brother. Yet, her ideas and practices – though scandalous in their day – matched those of her sibling both in breadth and depth. Possibly even more so – there is still so much more to research and for future scholars to unearth about both the Bergsons and their strange ideas about spirit, matter, images, and, of course, time. The vestiges of Mina's mystic philosophy comprise occult training techniques, Hermetic worldviews, and a spiritual performance art that, set side by side with the more usual tropes of her brother's philosophy (intuition, empirical evidence, deduction, argument), unveil nothing less in comparison. All the same, both the philosopher and the mystic only ever glimpsed something “wider” from each of their vantage points, hers incarnated through forms of dance and ritualised movements, his governed by philosophical codes and experiments.

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Notes

- 1 These part-whole relations are not spatial but temporal such that, in Bergsonian hands, mereology is best understood only when temporalised – see Ó Maoilearca, 2023.
- 2 As performed here, these Rites invoked the spirit of Isis into a statue, but it is the movements of Mina's body (as "priestess") that invoke the spirit. But it could also have been invoked directly into her own body: see Butler (2011, 58) who notes that for the Golden Dawn, "divine forces can be made to appear in people as well". Nonetheless, as Butler adds (92): "One thing we do know about the cult of Isis is that its rituals required a house or temple because of the tradition in Egyptian cults in which the divinity was believed to reside within statues. This is interesting when speculating that the ritual may have involved the animation of these statues by the divinity, or even, in a theurgic spirit, the animation of those taking part in the ritual. This speculation was one held by MacGregor Mathers and his wife in their re-enactment of the rites of Isis in Paris". See also Butler (2011, 146–148) on other subtle differences between invocation and evocation, especially in the Golden Dawn and its use of *unmediated* magic (where no intermediary spirits are needed for the magician to invoke or evoke a spirit or power from a spirit).
- 3 I say "partially" because it was a two stage process: in one version of the myth, Osiris, a king of Egypt, was murdered and dismembered by his brother Sep; so Isis must first find the parts of his body and reintegrate or defragment them. This brings him partly back to life in what we might call a supernatural fashion. But then, in what we would later dub a "supernormal" continuation, Osiris is fully resurrected only through *biological reproduction*: for Isis is both Osiris' sister *and* wife, and their son, Horus, is the ordinary means by which Osiris' continuation and survival can be completed.
- 4 See Greer (1995, 237–238, 250).
- 5 For the French original, see Bergson (1959, 498–499): "l'amoncellement *du* passé sur *le* passé se poursuit sans trêve", and then "c'est avec *notre* passé tout entier, y compris notre courbure d'âme originelle, que nous désirons, voulons, agissons", followed by "de cette survivance *du* passé résulte l'impossibilité, pour une conscience, de traverser deux fois le même état". See also his *Cours* on memory (Bergson 2018, pp. 32–33): 'si nous pouvions la retrouver, nous serions transportés dans le passé; nous revivriions notre passé' etc.
- 6 Both Bertrand Russell and Jacques Maritain specifically upbraided Henri Bergson for this conflation of memory with the past; see Russell (1914, 21–24); Maritain (1968, 219–223, 231–236).
- 7 See also de Warren (2015, 248): "The pure or virtual past is not *in* me; on the contrary, I live *in* the pure past".
- 8 See Brang et al 2010.
- 9 A sistrum was an ancient Egyptian musical instrument like a rattle – once which Mina used in her Golden Dawn performances.
- 10 See also Mullarkey 2006, Chapter Five.
- 11 See Lincoln (1986, 21–22).

- 12 An “encosmic” divinity is immanent, one might even say earthly.
- 13 Indeed, the charge that mystical systems of thought desire unity with one absolute principle may well be undeserved in many cases, at least in terms of their underlying metaphysics. See Jones (2016, 193–194): “most mystical systems do not involve an all-encompassing nonduality in which all of the apparent diversity in the world is in the final analysis unreal. ... There may be a sense of union or a sense of individuality melting away, but there is no *ontic change in nature* from what was already our true situation all along – only the false conceptual boundaries that we ourselves had created soften or disappear. Through experiencing the commonality of being, one gains a knowledge by participation, but there still is no new ontic union of substances”. Jones continues, using Brahmanism as his example (197): “For Advaita, only Brahman is real, and thus there is nothing else to unite with it. There is no ‘absorption’ of an independent self into ‘the Absolute’. Nor is the universe the pantheistic body of Brahman. The Upanishads have an emanationist position, but Advaita and Samkhya interpret the situation differently. The popular image of a drop of water merging in the ocean does not fit the metaphysics of these traditions”.
- 14 Such temporalisation is more than simply time-sampling, which would still be quantitative. A *temporalised* scale must be distinguished from a *temporal* scale – which is only the quantification of a process: the former is the qualification of a quantity, a spatial entity integrated into real time.
- 15 See Pattison and Kirkpatrick 2018 for a very respectable collection of essays on the mystical sources of existentialism. For the Gnostic, or rather “Hermetic”, Hegel, see Magee 2001. See also Ramey (2012, 234n) on such readings: “Certain post-Kantian thinkers such as Hegel, Schelling, Novalis, and Josef Hoëné-Wronski were all strongly influenced by esoteric traditions. As [Christian] Kerslake has now definitively shown, this post-Kantian esoteric line had a profound influence upon Deleuze”.
- 16 Even for Canguilhem, though, what counted was the first term, the *élan*, movement, or direction: life or spirit *is* matter in an opposed direction.

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13 A Phenomenology of the Esoteric

On “Soul” and “Time”

Tareq Ayoub

The seemingly uneventful and motionless moment when our future steps into us is so much closer to life than that loud and accidental moment of time when it happens to us as if from outside.

-Rainer Maria Rilke; 8th letter to the young poet
Franz Xaver Kappus; August 12, 1904, Flädie, Sweden

Phenomenology and Esoteric Knowledge

The complexity of esotericism, a phenomenon that does not allow for a unified or simple process of explanation, is reflected in the mystical thought and practice of most, if not all, mystics; but also, in occultists, alchemists, kabbalists, even in poets and astrologists. In its mystical context, it is a phenomenon that cannot be understood without reference to a hermeneutics of revelation; one that seeks the inner union of the soul with God. One particularly generative overlapping area between esoteric knowledge and phenomenology revolves around the notions of soul and time. This approach to the study of esoteric experiences suggests the integration of multiple phenomenological perspectives which, instead of creating interdisciplinary constraints, illumine esoteric intuition with regard to its positioning in different horizons of inquiry (Crouch & Louchakova 2017, 669–671). In this case, the primary task of a *phenomenological* inquiry on the esotericism of soul and time is not to provide a definite answer to temporal or spiritual questions but to clarify the hidden factors implied by it. Phenomenologically, one follows the description of some phenomenon in the hope that through reflection one will gain an *Anschauung* or insight into the essence of the thing. As noted by Stein, insight does not occur as some sort of magical vision or interior manifestation, it is the result of philosophical rigour (Schudt, 2002).

Touching upon Christian and Islamic esotericism, their most basic discussions of “soul” and “time” require an understanding of the dynamism of spiritual transformation and mystical experience. In the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi, he expressed this dynamism through a process that sought motivation from the awareness of the tension that exists between the temporal and divine realms; specifically conceptualising time in the soul’s becoming (Böwering 2012, 108–110). Meister Eckhart’s mysticism may have been sparked as a consequence to such experiences, what he later sought as a habituating sense of God’s efficacy in the soul (Kieckhefer, 1978, 203–209).¹ The mystical thought and esoteric practices of Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart cannot be fully grasped without explicit reference to revelation and its associated hermeneutics – which holistically seeks the inner meaning of all revealed scripture, understood as the eternal unity between the soul and God. In this context, I suggest they be read in conjunction.

The chapter will also emphasise the effectivity of cross-interpreting the philosophy and esotericism of both these mystics to further understand the phenomenality and spiritual embodiment of the soul while encouraging a re-reading of Edith Stein’s meticulousness of feelings in reflecting the “soul’s core”. With these connections in mind, there is a lack of understanding when it comes to the mutuality of Islamic and Christian esotericism. This chapter will attempt to highlight the intricacies of Islamic esotericism in line with Western Christian esotericism, while simultaneously emphasising the aspects of “soul” and “time” between them.

Edith Stein reaches an analogous conclusion in her discussion of temporality and spirituality. She is primarily known for her phenomenological work on empathy and affectivity, and is considered to be a realist phenomenologist closely associated with the Göttingen School and a Christian metaphysician after her conversion (Lebech 2015, 161).² Born a Jew in 1891, she later converted to Catholicism in 1922 and was ordained a Carmelite nun in 1933. She was killed in Auschwitz in 1942, and declared a Catholic martyr and saint in 1998.³ Influenced by Aquinas, Augustine, John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart, her examination of the connection between the soul, body, and spirit evolves as she phenomenologically incorporates the Thomistic structures of matter and form, potency and act. In Thomist philosophy, the root principle of differentiation, particularly in the consideration of the divine substance, is matter. Upon close interaction with Aquinas, Stein conceives the personal carrier, the individual’s personhood, as the ground or root principle of individual being. In Stein’s conception, we do not find the root principle of individual being in the self-moulding of the form into space-filling matter, but see in this a kind of “communicability” of spiritual forms to space-filling matter (Lebech

2013, 20–32; Shabanova, 2016, 108–113). Stein’s interpretation of time even traverses the rational and seizes the mystical, allowing for an articulation of sanctified or “divine” temporality (Calcagno 2008, 69–72). Stein was adamant that to gain a clear insight into the peculiarity of the human soul, it is necessary that we first acquire an adequate understanding of its interiority (Calcagno, 2008).

This chapter will highlight the contextual significance of the etymology of the Arabic terms “*Dahr*” and “*Zamān*”, both used to connote chronological and *kairological* conceptions of time. Chronological time refers to measured and quantitative time. Time as *Kairos*, on the other hand, is that point in time where no worldly correlation comes to appearance, where that time cannot be known either in advance or at the time of its arrival; only with the eyes of some quasi-faith can it be properly encountered; it is the temporal dimension of decision. As such, chronology forms a continuity, which is suspended in the *kairological* moment (Soulaymane 2021, 430–431). To further understand the conceptual fluidity of temporality in the Qur’an and esoteric Muslim teachings peculiar to Islamic theology, I am suggesting a reflection on the Muslim concept of *Barzakh* – the temporal horizon in and after death – in parallel with Stein’s unique interpretation of the *Aevum*. This will be underlined by expounding the relations between time and the “soul’s becoming” in (Islamic and Christian) esoteric thought. This stream of esoteric thought is also detected in Stein’s work where she bases her understanding of John of the Cross and Augustine, along with her reaction to Heidegger’s understanding of ecstatic temporality in *Being and Time*, on the possibility of eternity based on sanctified temporality, the *aevum*. The realisation of the primal identity of mystical experiences, divine transcendence of the cosmos, and the divine immanence of the soul are gained through an explicit process of divination (Dobie, 2010). It is a theological dialectical realisation that must transform the ways by which the basic principles of philosophy interact with and in turn transform the way scripture is read, interpreted, and ultimately *lived*.

Esotericism, Phenomenology, and Theology

In identifying the field of esotericism with religious studies, the study of esotericism recapitulates and is forced into an entanglement of the very same debates where religion has become the object of attention. Indeed, esotericism as a field of study is not part of theology or religious studies, even though it has been argued that its roots can be traced back to them (Eliade & Trask 1965, 52–59). The fact that the study of esotericism shares a wide range of characteristics with its dual ancestral “science” of religion and theology does not mean that scholars of esoteric thought should be conflicted in perpetually searching for ways to escape the discipline’s

condition and continuously failing to do so. Western esotericism, as a field of study, has recently witnessed levels of growth thanks to scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff (Voss & Faivre 1995, 48–77; Hanegraaff 2022, 130–139). At the same time, it is thought that most scholars of Islam showed no interest in this field. As a result, there is a lack of mutual understanding of the relationship between Islamic and Christian esotericism. This chapter will attempt to correct this misconception and highlight the intricacies of Islamic esotericism in line with Western or Christian esotericism, while simultaneously emphasising the aspects of “soul” and “time” between them. Indeed, the paradoxical nature of esoteric knowledge and mystical theories make it quite difficult to have them explicated. In parallel with this examination, this albeit summarised study will accentuate the relationship between Islamic and Western esotericism.

The Islamic world was from the outset characterised by a plurality of theological and philosophical currents. There always existed Neoplatonic schools that were more open to esoteric and hermetic doctrines, especially in the milieu of Shi’i and Sufi communities (Nasr 1970, 229–242). In contrast to postmodern approaches and in line with Hanegraaff’s method, this research is carried out with the minimum level of theoretical weight since the prime objective “consists in listening to what the sources have to tell us instead of imposing our own wisdom”.⁴ The unity of Islamic and Christian esotericism is implied in the unsaid affirmation that highlights the dynamic and transformative plurality of forms of revelation through time and space in the soul.

To speak of Islam’s mystical tradition, it is necessary to understand the meaning of mysticism in its Arab and Islamic context, especially considering the tenuous status of its meaning in today’s English. In its Muslim context, mysticism is associated with the esoteric dimension of Islam. For the most part, it is popularly identified with Sufism, as well as Shi’i esotericism and Isma’ili philosophy. In fact, and albeit in different ways and extents, Shi’ism and Sufism reflect the intrinsic aspects of Islamic orthodoxy in its theological and universal framework – as tradition and an all-encompassing truth contained within a form of revelation (Nasr 1970, 228–235). Indeed, the current reality of Shi’ism and Sufism, perceived as integral vehicles of the Islamic revelation, is too deep to be neglected or even brushed aside by historical or theological arguments (Nasr 1970, 228–235). From the Sunni point of view, Sufism is cognate with Shi’ism since it has assimilated some Shi’i characteristics.⁵ From the Shi’i point of view, Sufism originated in Shi’ism. Shi’ism has always been understood based on the *asrār*, the esoteric instructions of the Prophet, which many Shi’i authors have identified with the Shi’i doctrine of *taqiyaḥ* (concealment) (Reza Shah-Kazemi 2015, 34–38; Nasr 1970, 238–239). In such a fluid environment, the elements of Islamic esotericism which are particularly Shi’i in essence, appear to also

represent the esoteric teachings in the Sunni world. No better instance of this can be found than in Ali ibn Abi Talib, of whom the Prophet said was “as my own soul” [*ka-nafsi*].⁶ Shi’ism is primarily the “Islam of Ali” who, according to the Shi’a community, is both the “spiritual” and “temporal” authority after the Prophet. The reverence in which he is held by Shi’as and Sufis alike shows how intimately connected Shi’ism and Sufism are (Nasr 1970, 238–239).

Thus, it is important to dispense any doubt as to whether there is such a thing as Islamic esotericism in the first place. Although, it is well noted that the term “esotericism” is rarely used in Islamic studies, the term is, in fact, implied in Alexander Knysh’s work to denote the Shi’ite gnosis tradition, known as *‘irfān* (Knysh 1992, 634–639). This goes in line with Henry Corbin’s use of the term “esoteric” to translate the Arabic terms *bāṭin* and *ghayb* (both used to denote hidden, inward, or concealed meanings) (Corbin 2014, 338–345). To the Muslim mystic, the nature of things is completely inaccessible without any divine revelation. The fulfilment of this esoteric hermeneutics is wholly based on the aforementioned union of soul and God (Nasr 1970, 236–238). Briefly, *‘irfān* is literally “knowing”. However, knowing has different stages. In the Shi’i and Sufi lexicon, these *‘irfāni* stages are gnosis, which according to Shi’i sources, is not an absolute matter; it is graduated and obtained through developing higher levels of divine knowing or unification (Corbin 2014, 338–345). In this light, it is not surprising to find Imam Ali standing at the pinnacle of all the chains of transmission [*salāsīl*] by which the mystical orders trace their spiritual masters back to the Prophet. In the words of Sayyid Ali Hujwiri, author of one of the most authoritative texts on early Sufism, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, stated that “Imam Ali is the leader of the saints and the pure” (Reza Shah-Kazemi 2015, 34–38).

Muslim Esotericism of Time and Soul

In the pre-Islamic tradition of the *jāhiliyya*, the Arabs conceived time as rooted in their experience of *dahr*; an infinite extension of temporality that stretches into the horizon (Böwering 1992, 77–89). In Old Arab *jāhiliyya* poetry, for instance, this *dahr* is portrayed as an almost mythical creature, a being of all-devouring time (Böwering 1992, 77–89). Denoted as both “days” and “nights”, *dahr* is the measure of destiny and is exceptionally *not* doomed to death. This fatalistic outlook is expressed and contextualised in surra 45:24 of the Qur’an: “They [the pagan Arabs] assert, there is nothing but our life in this present world; we die, we live, and nothing destroys us but time”. Pre-Islamic Arabs embodied a doctrine that not only personified time, but deified it, making it analogous to the Greek God *Khronos* (Diagne 2021, 436–440).

Such questions of existence, destiny, and eternal time in pre-Islamic Arabian poetry were ultimately related to pre-Semitic and Semitic mythology (Shidfar 1985).⁷ The lineage can also be traced back to preceding civilisations, and it reflects the philosophy and ethics that exists in poetry, consequently further developing the expression of *zuhd* (renunciations [usually towards material desires]) and the genre of *zuhdiyyāt* in pre- and post-Islamic periods.⁸ Asserting an acute metaphysical primacy of life, the deification of *dahr* required a certain posture and moral attitude towards any sense of transcendence beyond life (Böwering 1992, 77–89). Understandably, through the dreadfulness of desert life, unceasing tribal wars, distressing uncertainties about the future, the growing frequency of unexpected deaths, pre-Islamic inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula were inclined towards meditations on the morbid/miserable questions such as time, fate, and life (Böwering 1992, 77–89). Islamic philosophy advanced a great variety of theories explaining time, with Islamic mysticism in particular playing an integral role in blending seemingly contradictory conceptions of temporality integrated into an understanding of human experience (Gasimova 2014, 324–327). The contextualised and correlative use of Allah and *dahr* can be traced back to an important *hadith* in which God is the speaker: “God said: Man insults Me in blaming time (*dahr*); I am time” (Böwering 1992, 77–89). Time, in both its *kairological* and chronological contexts, is pervasive in Islamic history, and that being so, it is central to Arabic language, poetry, and literature. It proved to be indispensable to the historical progression of Islamic astronomy and music, and was recognised as constitutive for Islamic rituals and law (Böwering 1992, 77–89).

In the Qur’an, time is the precarious moral span of history, suspended between judgement and creation. As such, it has been considered essential in Islamic theology, cosmology, and philosophy.⁹ Ibn ‘Arabi attempts to map out the possible modalities of the soul’s ability to grasp its own unfolding, consciously placing emphasis on the spiritual characteristics that lead to a unified awareness where the realisation of the “form of the formless” is achieved. His *magnum opus*, *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* is mostly contextualised upon the diverse and transformative knowledge that is granted based on the specific levels of realisation and awareness reached. He attempts to explicate the esoteric knowledge, or *‘irfān*, and its level-based implication on the self-realisation of one’s spiritual becoming, which is embodied by sages and prophets. Each of these, “the levels” or “stations”, represent the actualisation of the potentiality of deiformity, understood as the instance of divine characterisation. Accordingly, at each divine attribute and prophetic archetype, a “station” [*maqam*] is set up; it is on this *maqam* that human beings stand and from which they can continue to conceive the nature of things, however it is unsure if death is implied in any of these stations (Ibn ‘Arabi 1989, 440–475).¹⁰

This “self-understanding” culminates with the “Perfect Man” and is the holistic understanding of scripture, being [*wujud*], the cosmos, God, and the human soul which all pertain to different “stations” of knowledge as well as standpoints in reality. The Perfect Man stands in the *Station of No Station* which is the only podium that provides the view from *Nowhere* (Ibn ‘Arabi 1989, 400–404).¹¹ Thus, the true nature of *wujud* is inaccessible to the human intellect without special revelation, but this mystical hermeneutic is not fulfilled until it leads to union of the soul with God (Ibn ‘Arabi 1911, 106–109, 129–132). In unconnected sections of his work, Ibn ‘Arabi concocted a vision of time that links three principal notions which had been concurrent in Arab and Islamic discourse on temporality for centuries: *dahr*, *zaman*, and *waqt* (Ibn ‘Arabi 1989, 130–140).¹² His method of exposition is highly intuitive, and he uses illustrative *a priori* reasoning which is not the basis for any *posteriori* inference. The originality of his work is based on the combination of an atomistic notion of time as *waqt* and an esoteric vision of time as *dahr* with a cosmological, relative, and historical understanding of time as *zaman* (Ibn ‘Arabi 1911, 140–141, 538–540, 546–549). Thus, humanity is situated on the *barzakh* (barrier or isthmus) between the temporal and eternal dimensions of reality, which can be understood in two ways: “above nature” [*fawqa ṭ-ṭabī‘a*] and below nature [*taḥta ṭ-ṭabī‘a*] (Ibn ‘Arabi 1911, 113–129). Time below is a replication [*mazḥar*] of time above. For Ibn Arabi, the temporal course that the celestial spheres follow is an imaginary one because time is but an imaginary expanse. For him, time is at once *‘adam* (non-existence) and is possessed of *lā wujūd* (no-being) (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1911). Time that is above nature, *dahr*, becomes distinct and discernible through the present states that occur in those that are in possession of existence, denoting a transgenerational continuity (Ibn ‘Arabi 1911, 290–292, 330–340).

Ibn ‘Arabi further develops his dynamic understanding of God as *dahr* by comparing its nature with that of the human heart [*qalb*] (Ibn Arabi 2015, 9). In a familiar Arabic saying, the *qalb* is given its name because God had made the heart sway from one mood to another [*taqlīb*]; highlighting the *changes [taqalub] of the heart* (Chittick 1989, 106). The nature of *dahr* is inclusive of change; its inherent quality is transitional and is made to be altered (Chittick 2005, 160). In the understanding that God is time, God undergoes this mechanism of transition by fashioning the forms [*sūwar*] of creation. As such, the day [*yawm*] is the measure by divine *nafas*, the life-breath, that ensouls all living beings. By observing one’s *qalb*, the abode of gnostic knowledge, which for Ibn ‘Arabi is the essential and inherent drive of the *‘aql* (reason, intellect), the individual soul is at once united with God and completely knows God (Chittick 2005, 160–161). This knowledge does not come in the form of reason, not even of faith, but as the ground

for every act of knowing of the soul and its very own existence (Chittick 2007, 3–11).

Western Esotericism and Muslim Esoteric Thought: De-Temporalising the Now?

Reading Muslim mystical experiences, especially that of Ibn Arabi, in light of Western esoteric thought prompts a need to highlight those mystical experiences, for Meister Eckhart, are complete, real, certain, and homogeneous. To him, when we are in the “sublime state” we are, in fact, in a perfect enduring “now” emphasising the inexistence of time for us in this moment. However, although nothing changes during this sublime state, every second within it is considered completely new for us (Landau 1998, 388–390). At least for both Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart, any understanding of the dialectical nature of a relationship with God essentially springs from the revealed text, and assumes a certain level of meaning and existential significance for the individual, only insofar as it is directed towards the understanding of the experience of revelation. This is how the soul experiences the truth of existence through time. Out of this experience comes a fullness of an understanding of God qua being, that is, of divine sanctified knowledge. Hence, we can understand that in both Meister Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi, this knowledge is not theoretical, but rather existential and practical; considered a lived basis for all action and thought. According to our two mystics, such revelations which yield such knowledge would have been unattainable by human reason alone. At the soul’s intersection of the realms of temporality and eternity, the beginning can be said to be the end and vice versa. This means that the very non-existence of either termination points of time can be said to equal pre-eternity and eternity. The only permanence, however, is present time, the “now” moment. When posited, the “now” affirms the reciprocity of time between God and the world. In the “now”, both God’s eternity as well as man’s *kairological* moment exist simultaneously. Intuitively, then, such sages and mystics seek to contain the cluster of “nows” in a *zarf* [vessel] where only imagination can conceive of the unity of the temporal and divine realms.¹³

Through the Qur’an and Bible, mystical knowledge is deemed possible because they both allow for a true albeit different understanding of being as something that is lived in the depth of the believer’s own existence. It goes without saying that essential characteristics of the Qur’an and the Bible have a profound effect on the way Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart expound upon this dialectic. In both their deliberations, it is the divine transcendental that operates within the individual soul’s union with God. Of course, at this point into his studies, Meister Eckhart had recognised

that his reflections on soul, time, and existence would result in uncovering a layer of reality that is unfathomable through propositional language. As a result, he highlights his fundamental thesis, “Existence is God”, using the “is” as a copula to connect and bind the notion “existence” to “God”. Notably, the subject of the proposition “Existence is God” is existence itself (Dobie 2010, 67). In parallel to Ibn Arabi’s mysticism, it becomes possible to correlate an Eckhartian emphasis of God’s *trans-conceptual* nature and *pre-conceptual* nature, prompting a conception of God as the basis of all human thought. So, all kinds of *asrār* and genuine knowledge of God comes not with a process of adding predicates to our language to capture the essence of the divine, but rather by stripping them away (Dobie 2010, 86). Only when the soul adds absolutely nothing to its concept of God and abides by it in existence does it truly understand God. Here, existence is united to what is most intimate and particular, the inner depth of the soul. Based on this understanding, the eternal being intersects with the temporal man.

On the Fullness of Time: The *Qalb* and Time

We have seen in what ways Ibn Arabi’s understanding of ‘*aql* and time can be read phenomenologically. Simultaneously, spirit [*rūḥ*] is embodied in the heart and the soul [*nafs*] of man, and it is only when the ‘*aql* is restored in the *qalb* that our primordial nature is regained, and admitted, fully realising the highest level of awareness, a primal character of the Perfect Man. The fullness of time coincides with a spiritual fullness; like awakening an inward eye of the heart that sees the fullness of reality as it is truly manifested. Ibn ‘Arabi details a hermeneutics of a “science of the soul” through which wayfaring souls can make a return to the Divine (Ibn Arabi 1989, 440).

Essentially a Platonist, Ibn ‘Arabi sees authentic existence in God whose essence is at the same time His existence. Accordingly, we exist authentically only towards the degree that we are not imprisoned in the *Chronos* of our temporality. Instead, authentic life, for us, begins when God’s eternity is embraced through the heart, allowing the realisation of a fullness of time that not only realises itself, but does so in a dynamic and constant flow of manifestations. In this fullness, divine temporality is not an abstract now that is motionless and solely corresponds to a particular concept, form, or manifestation (Chittick 2007, 3–11). Instead, this fullness stipulates the *Kairos* in the soul’s assumption of divine traits as its own. Coincidentally, Stein provides a phenomenological explication of the heart’s spiritual significance, though in a distinct situation. For her, even though the heart symbolises the bodily organ to which embodiment and activity to life is tied, we find no difficulty in our ability to picture the heart as the inner

being of the soul (Kłos 2021, 179). This is primarily because the heart evidently holds the greatest share in its inner processes, and is the space where the interconnection between soul and body is mostly experienced and strikingly felt (Kłos 2021, 179–186). In light of Stein’s phenomenological insight then, the appropriation of divine being, which is unconcealed for Ibn ‘Arabi based on the intellect’s nature to know, can only come through the heart. In conforming itself to the theatre of divine manifestations, the heart actually – in Chittick’s interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi – comes in “behind” the manifestation so as to fully embrace the concealment of divine attributes and the un-concealment of God, hence embracing that which is divine itself. It is through this temporal *kairological* fullness of the heart that one enters divine being, appropriating its traits as one’s own (Chittick 2007, 8–10).

Eckhart highlights a similar “*kairological* fullness” of time, one that stretches *beyond* eternity. Through this understanding, the “now” is no longer confined to the concept of time, but is used to actively reveal the presence of God. In his differentiation between being and becoming, Eckhart radically removes the concept of time from the philosophical and theological speculation of God, and thereby allocates temporality to the realm of becoming (towards that which is divine) once and for all. The conceptualisation of “now” gains the ability to overcome the polarity between the ephemeral and the eternal, the changing and the everlasting, while breaking through the boundary of eternity, to bring us back to this world in time.¹⁴ On this note, one could recollect Eckhart’s dramatic opening lines in Sermon One: “Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth ... because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature” (Eckhart 1979, 1).

Meister Eckhart regards time as the precondition of eternity, which is expounded by the concepts “fullness of time” and “now of eternity”, with what he describes as the move from the division and multiplicity of time to the simplicity and unity of eternity that occurs in the ground of the soul in human nature and in time. Eckhart’s eternity is *eternity that is in time*. It is in this sense that Eckhart highlights the soul as the place of eternity in temporality, of infinity in finitude, of Being in nothing – “it is detached from here and now and from the whole natural order” (Eckhart, Sermon 83, in *The Essential Eckhart*, 206).¹⁵ Deification is primarily not a matter of the graced reception and subsequent ontological new relationship to the Triune God, it is instead the process of uncovering and existentially appropriating that which we always were but hitherto lived “in ignorance” (Eckhart, Sermon 10, in Teacher and Preacher, 262); understood as the astounding reality of the deiforming super-naturality of the *spark of the soul*, of the truth that “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me” (Eckhart 1981, 87); that “God’s ground is my

ground, and my ground is God’s ground” (Eckhart, Sermon 5b, in *The Essential Eckhart*, 183).¹⁶

On the Barzakh and the Aevum: Esotericism and Temporality

The Qur’anic discourse of *dahr*, *zamān*, and *waqt* is marked by constant admonitions about the Hour [*al-sā’ā*], commonly understood as the Day of Judgement; the proximity of which is highlighted, even though the exact moment of its occurrence is not revealed (Tesei 2015, 34–39). These verses from *sūrat al-mu’minūn* in the Qur’an forms the basis for the question of the intermediate state, or *barzakh*, in between the living and the dead, on one hand, and between temporality and eternity, on the other (Tesei 2015, 40–48). Indeed, references to the term *barzakh* are already contextualised in many places. The term is not employed by the Qur’an as if it were mysterious or novel in any way, and the first audience of the Qur’an are expected to inherently understand it without explanation (Archer 2017, 60–63, 388–414). The term does not have a semitic root, but it is neither considered a “foreign term” in the strictest sense and seems to have been current in the Arabic lexicon for quite some time. The term entered Arabic from either Middle Persian [*frasang/frasangan*] or Greek [*parasangēs*], and indicates a “tract of land”, hence a barrier, or isthmus (Archer 2017, 388–414). Indeed, God made the *barzakh* “as much to keep the dead away from interfering with the living as to keep the living from interfering with the dead” (Archer 2017, 288). The term *barzakh* is the crux of intersection between time and eternity, its interpretation as a “barrier” is emphasised as a result of its contextualisation, in *surra* 25:53 and *surra* 55:19 of the Qur’an, to explain the divine ability to separate the two cosmic seas of sweet and salt waters. Interestingly enough, it seems that the Qur’an attributes to the *barzakh* the twofold function of cosmological and eschatological partition (Tesei 2015, 34–39). The term *barzakh* is a barrier, but here, *barzakh* does not mean “barrier”.

The scene in *surra* 23:99–100, which presents a sinner who begs God to be allowed to return to the realm of temporality (life) so he can re-act righteously implies that the dead, beyond the *barzakh*, embody a conscious state that is similar to the one experienced in life. The difference, however, lies in the language used in the Qur’an. As Reynolds had pointed out, the excessively homiletic language points to the requirement that those that are alive ought not to postpone their repentance. The similarity in the levels of consciousness in life and in the *barzakh* point to the mystical possibility of time after death, of time in the *barzakh*, of time after the *dahr* or a different mode of temporality within it (Reynolds 2007, 1–4). Despite the Qur’an providing several hints that the dead shall not possess any conscious record about the events they will undergo, the dead

will *feel* “that they have not tarried but an hour of the day”. Their ability to feel duration, and the passage of time, affirms that on the Last Day – Day of Judgement – the dead will feel. This allows us to highlight two things: first, that the dead do demonstrate signs of consciousness albeit on a much different level than what we currently understand as life consciousness; second, that the nature of time is quite dynamic and depends on the soul. The same *topos* of the impossibility of grasping the length or duration of time after death, or time in the *barzakh*, occurs in more elaborated ways in other Qur’anic passages. In the account of the man and his donkey, God “made him die a hundred years”, and after raising him, God questions him: “‘How long hast thou tarried?’ He responds, ‘I have tarried a day, or part of a day’. God tells him, ‘Nay; thou hast tarried a hundred years...’”¹⁷ In this particular case, one cannot help but emphatically grasp the timelessness in such a divine communion, a sort of divine *kairological* momentum in the *‘awqāt* (moments) of *dahr*.

By tracing this continuous eschatological polemic over the centuries, it is suggested that belief in the mortality of the soul was fairly widespread among pre-Islamic Arabs and Arab Christians. In fact, this very understanding may be alluded to in some Qur’anic passages.¹⁸ However, the Qur’an also affirms that “it is not given to any soul to die ...” [*mā kāna li-nafsin an Tamūta*]¹⁹ while in another verse of the same surah, “every soul shall taste death” [*kullu nafsin dhā’iqatu l-mawti*],²⁰ an assertion that is repeated twice more in the Qur’an. Beyond deliberating on the death of the soul, Stein admits the reality of death and even distinguishes between death and dying. She not only rejects the individuated nature of death by highlighting its intersubjective nature, but also provides her understanding of the possibility of time after death, especially for the blessed and sanctified. Similar to the temporal dynamics of the *barzakh*, Stein’s mysticism leads to her conceptualisation of the *aevum* – divine, sanctified, or heavenly time – as a metaphysical and ontological category in her understanding of life-fullness. For her, life after death, and life in the *aevum* effectively preserves moments of the lives of the blessed as constituent to the possible reality of timelessness through divine communion (Stein 2000, 95).

To understand Stein’s mystical phenomenology in her interpretation of the *aevum*, the treatment of the themes of death and the afterlife specifically in relation to her critique of Heidegger’s phenomenology of death and dying in *Being and Time* should not be overlooked (Stein 2000, 102–104). For Stein, there is an unmistakable phenomenological difference between death and dying (Stein 2000, 102–104). Death is not specifically “for myself” in a way that immediately eliminates its intersubjective context. On the contrary, death can be experienced and understood communally, developmentally, and intersubjectively through instances of empathetic individual conscious-lived experiences (Calcagno 2008, 64). Dying, on the

other hand, is inseparable from death and is a lived experience which can occur within consciousness; insofar as it is a conscious-lived experience it can also have its content represented within consciousness. This allows for us to deliver a concrete description of its essence, especially as it came to be within human existence (Stein 2000, 93). We experience our own death as a kind of dying in existence, it is in this sense that we are conscious of our deaths. For Stein, death has certain temporal implications. This is where her deliberations on questions of the possibility of an afterlife, the essence of its components, its metaphysics, and ontology are posited. For Stein, not only is death translated to an end of material time, or an end of the possibility of a process of the fullness of being; rather death reveals a temporal in-betweenness in time, an *aeuum* (Calcagno 2008, 68).

To a certain extent, Stein actually considers death to be a completion of an authentic life, providing the possibility for making sense of life as a complete, discrete, and meaningful whole (Orr 2014, 566). According to Orr, Stein actualises this by combining elements of life-philosophy from her earlier phenomenological work with a deliberate and concise refashioning of Aquinas’ arguments on the contingency of God’s existence from which she moves towards the necessity of an ontologically ultimate-being that is transcendent of any temporal limitation (Orr 2014, 559–566). It is only through the slender opening of a temporal analogy was Stein able to construct a phenomenology of temporality from existential elements of temporal self-awareness to an elaboration of an atemporal source which gifts the possibility of such self-awareness. This points to an intimate association between time and being that parallels Heidegger’s interpretation of authentic Dasein’s ecstatic temporality and its dynamic relationship to “the nothing”, or the nothingness of being (Heidegger 1962, 241; 264–269).

Stein’s Mysticism from Aquinas to John of the Cross

The most fundamental problem Stein would retain with Aquinas’ thought through to *Finite and Eternal Being* was that matter should be the principle of individuation (Lebech 2013, 76).²¹ For Stein, the human being is also a composite of form and matter, hence in this respect “an essence or nature that is always and everywhere the same” (Lebech 2013, 76–78). At the same time one concrete human being is entirely different from other human beings. Indeed, for Stein, individuals are *carriers* of species particularities as well as external particularities which are formed by means of interaction with the external. She adopts the motifs *life-power* and *life-feeling* from Dilthey and situates them within the framework that amalgamates theological thought, mysticism, and ontology (Stein 2002).²² In this case, *life-power* is conceived in quantitative terms and governed by certain laws that seem to be analogous, at least procedurally, to the ways

that govern the laws of energy conservation (Orr 2014). So, once the individual expands their life-force, they are motivated to engage in means that would replenish it (Stein 2002).

For Stein, as can be understood based on an analysis of her later works, that replenishment is imperative for one's core, which she locates within the soul. She has always been open to contemplating the role of mystical and spiritual experiences in such an invigorating process (Stein 2002). This brings to mind St. John of the Cross' *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*, for which Stein expressed her deep appreciation, noting that "with holy respect we can approach these divine secrets [in the most intimate part of the chosen soul.] But once the curtain is opened, one may not be silent" (Stein, 2006, 244).²³ Inclusive of her analysis of sensory, volitional, and general acts to determine the existence of the ego, and an explicit understanding of the soul, Stein employs the phenomenological and cosmological insights of Hedwig Conrad Martius on the nature of temporality to present the hypothesis that behind the possibility and spirituality of the ego is being itself (Gschwandtner 2022, 92–95). She affirms that every moment in time, whether in the future, present, or past, is not enacted by itself, rather it is only projected or anticipated. As such, time considered in itself is always something which can never be fully grasped (Calcagno & Miron 2022). Despite this ever-fleeing consciousness of time, there is still a continuum or unity (*Erlebniseinheiten*) of experiences rooted in time which is made present (Calcagno & Miron 2022).

To describe being, Stein employed the metaphor of an infant sustained and kept up-straight by strong arms. The child knows no fear of falling or being hurt; being aware of a sense of security and safety. Stein attempts to describe the full sense of being; as Calcagno notes, it is a *plenitudo ommitudinis* (Calcagno 1998, 368–376; Stein 2000, 100–113). Heidegger, in his *Being and Time*, chose to understand being in terms of a liberating authenticity towards death; making him the philosopher of death *par excellence*, as Arendt rightfully noted. Stein, on the other hand, wished to affirm the sustenance of experiences of life which we do not have control over; understanding it as being which is freely given to us as a gift. For Stein, the self is not actualised *ab initio* (Calcagno 1998, 368–376). Rather, its possibility is provided in our reception of the gift of our personal being. Our choice of its actualisation is what strictly distinguishes one individual from another, creating the dynamics of personal identity. For Stein, the difficulty in making concrete personal potentials without reference to the categorical logos is identified as difference (Calcagno 1998, 368–376). Unity and difference are not only logical terms, but are actually profoundly rooted and enacted in the human and divine worlds.

By employing the term "esoteric", these reflections are thoroughly rooted and fit well into our modern time in Stein's phenomenological

reflections. She described act and potency as modes of our being, having highlighted that the move from *passio* to *actio* is a creative one; a *veritable creatio* (Calcagno 1998, 368–376). The divine relation of the soul with God ought to be received, sustained, and created anew.²⁴ This triadic process of “incarnation” is actuated every time we act. Every time we act or respond to a certain solicitation, whether it was on human or divine levels, we are actively actualising our being; we activate and put to action our existence. Stein compares human life to a melody in which each sound differently when played. She considers the melody as the person’s “course of life as a time structure” (Kłos 2021, 180). Based on her understanding of it, the melody cannot be replayed in the exact manner as it did before; each time the melody springs differently. Using this as an analogy to the life of personhood, for Stein, the person is a *carrier* of a melody where it “springs” from personal being as from a projecting source (Kłos 2021, 180). Human life is for Stein, “a spiritual, personal, internal life that discloses itself to fellow humans and that is ever renewed from these sources; and, lastly, a life that is freely determined by the I”, implying that we must consider this radical dichotomy of human life of major significance for the individual being (Kłos 2021, 181–182). Beyond life, death also reveals an “in-betweenness of time” for Stein, and metaphysically and esoterically rely on an interplay of fullness and plenitude of being and nothingness (Calcagno 2008, 58–62).

Concluding Notes

This chapter sought to not only re-emphasise the rich tradition of esoteric knowledge within Islam, but also to offer a springboard for future research on the intersection between philosophy and scholarship on esotericism. By examining Ibn ‘Arabi alongside Meister Eckhart, through a comparative approach, informed by phenomenology’s focus on lived experience, we can trace a potential “conceptual continuation” of esoteric thought. This opens doors for a deeper understanding of how these traditions bridge the gap between divination, temporality, and the human soul. In regard to these subjects which are focal in the spiritual doctrine of both figures, it is my conviction that the outstanding esoteric resemblance between them is more than a consequence of the tenets they inherited from a possible shared philosophical lineage. It is at the same time the result of the immediacy of divine and deific lived-experiences. Without necessitating the endorsement of a “common core” explanation, this philosophical consonance in Eckhart’s and Ibn ‘Arabi’s practical mysticism opens a way for the development of a mutual understanding between Muslim and Christian esotericism. However, the uncanny likeness of both doctrines

and expressions, grounded in appeals to direct divine experience, as well as shared philosophical resources, does not entirely rule it out.

The fact that scholarship on Meister Eckhart has found close parallels in Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical doctrines (and vice versa) suggests that a comparative approach to esotericism offers exceptional benefits to students of both East and West. Strains of such esoteric conceptualisations can be traced in its practical forms in Stein’s Christian phenomenology. For Stein:

God leads each of us on an individual way; one reaches the goal more easily and more quickly than another. We can do very little ourselves, compared to what is done to us. But that little bit we must do. Primarily, this consists before all else of preserving in prayer to find the right way, and of following without resistance the attracting of grace when we feel it. Whoever acts in this way and perseveres patiently will not be able to say that his efforts were in vain. But one may not set a deadline for the Lord.

(Stein, 1993, Section 102)

As a final note, with Stein’s mysticism kept in mind, neither Meister Eckhart nor Ibn ‘Arabi use the terms “mystic”, “mystical”, or especially “mysticism”, which are currently applied to them (Woods 2013, 76). In fact, these terms may not be completely inaccurate, since they are interpretative, and, as mentioned above, can be susceptible to a wide range of meanings. Counterintuitively, this also means that they may inherently carry heavy conceptual baggage that would harbour presuppositions that both Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi might find completely strange.

Notes

- 1 For more on this, see Carl Franklin Kelley, 1977. *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 119–138.
- 2 According to Stein, as “spiritual” the soul rises above itself, gaining insight into a world that lies beyond its own self – a world of things, persons, and events – communicating with this world and receiving its influences.
- 3 For more on Edith Stein’s life and philosophy, see Calcagno, Antonio, 2007, *The Philosophy of Edith Stein*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press; Caminada, Emanuele, 2015, “Edith Stein’s Account of Communal Mind and Its Limits: A Phenomenological Reading”, *Human Studies*, 38(4): 549–566. doi:10.1007/s10746-015-9373-1.
- 4 For more on postmodern approaches to esotericism see Barker, Victoria. “Postmodernism and the Logic of Esoteric Thought”. *Sydney Studies in Religion* (2004); On esotericism and alterity see Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

- 5 Ibn Khaldûn discusses the Sufi’s assimilation of Shi’i religious features stating that “the Sufi thus became saturated with Shi’i theories”. Through Al Junayd, a Sufi *Shaykh*, the practice of using a cloak [*Khirqah*] had been adopted based on the fact that it was a tradition inaugurated by (Imam) Ali when he clothed Al Hassan Al Basri and influenced him onto the mystic path. Ibn Khaldûn, *Muqaddimah*, trans. by F. Rosenthal, vol. II, New York, 1958, p. 187. Ibn Khaldun continues to suggest that Ali’s precedence to the Sufis in mysticism “smells strongly of pro-Shi’a sentiment”. According to this, and to other Sufi ideals, “the Sufis” were seen to have become “enmeshed in them [the Shi’a]”.
- 6 Imam Ali is the Prophet’s cousin, and his son-in-law (as the husband of Fatima Al Zahraa (daughter of the Prophet), he is the father of Imams Hassan and Husayn.
- 7 According to Gasimova, Shidfar’s work highlighted that the Assyrian language likely served as the key to pre-Islamic Arabs and their ability to learn from neighboring cultural achievements. As such, Syrians translated many Judaic and Christian books, scriptures, even books of Greek philosophers into their language long before the rise of Islam. See Е.Э. Бертельс [E.Y. Bertels], “Происхождение Суфизма и зарождение Суфийской литературы” [“The Origin of Sufism and Sufi Literature”], in Избранные сочинения: Суфизм и суфийская литература [Selected Works: Sufism and Sufi Literature] (Moscow, 1965), 24.
- 8 Generally, the first acquaintance with the spiritual life of pre-Islamic society inclines us to suggest that some predecessors and prerequisites of mysticism, such as *zuhd* (renunciation), *khalwa* (solitude, particularly in caves), and *jû* (starvation) could be found, even if faintly. Pre-Islamic Arabs used cloak [*khirka*], staff [*‘aşâ*], and bow [*qaws*] in their rituals, some of which subsequently turned into the integral characteristics of Sufi mystics in the Islamic period.
- 9 Böwering observed that the Arab lexicographers, had a great variety of terms for both a *kairological* and chronological conception of time. In general, they distinguished *dahr* as “time from the beginning of the world to its end”; *zaman* as “a long time having a beginning and an end”; the term *asr*, “a span of time” and *hin*; and “a period of time (little or a lot)”. As such, *dawam* is “duration”, and *mudda* “a space of duration (spatial time)”, *waqt* as “a moment in time”, and *‘ann* for “present time”. Chronologically, *awan* was termed for “a time or season, *yawm* as time connoting a day or night”, *sa’a* as “a time of day or of night”. *Abad* “connoted a sense of duration without an end”, *azal* “a duration without a beginning”, to which *qidam* in its primary sense was also understood as a time without a beginning, considered distinct from *sarmad*, “incessant continuance”, whereas *khulud* directed one’s understanding towards perpetual existence, a term that was heavily used and implicit in the Qur’an, as in *dar el-khulud*, denoting paradise, heaven, a time for perpetual existence; immortality.
- 10 Ibn ‘Arabi explains that there are countless “stations” of knowledge which lead towards spiritual perfection, each station bestowing specific character traits and necessary points of view all of which are timely and *kairologically* sound.

- 11 According to Ibn ‘Arabi, those who are able to reach the level to “stand” on the *Station of No Station*, the Perfect Man is, effectively, the human analogue of Nondelimited Being, one that assumes every delimitation without itself becoming limited.
- 12 The major chapters on time are each introduced by a few lines of Ibn ‘Arabi’s poetry. He used poetry as a preferred method of exposition, he tries to portray his philosophy and esoteric thinking through the beauty of poetic form frequently for the pedagogic purpose of memorisation.
- 13 Expressions about time are not directed towards objective time but phenomenological temporality; our being in time. By employing a phenomenological reading of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, we are able to grasp an inward experiential aspect of temporality. The old Augustinian axiom “I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am perplexed” marks eloquently enough the opacities confronting every attempt to speak philosophically about time, anonymities that are largely documented in esoteric writings. The complete comprehension of this occurs when our reading of Augustine shifts away from momentary time while thematising temporality. In this sense, Augustine’s account of being goes beyond offering a catalogue of existential concepts; it gives us a methodological paradigm for understanding why those concepts are concealed by the essence of existence in life. In this case, temporal perception and measurement are not mechanisms that take place in the world but in the soul, and happen to originate in relation to worldly affairs. However, they are not just instances or mere occurrences that take place within the soul. Rather, they are essential part of it, they belong to that specific “soul”. A phenomenological reading of Augustine stems from his methodological sympathy to phenomenology. For Ibn Arabi, the insight you gain through the power of imagination – an insight that is neither perceived by intellect nor sense perception – is that of the true existence (al-wujūd al-ḥaqq), to which we relate our existence to; Ibn Arabi denotes this relation as time, *dahr*. It alone rules everything that may be imagined to be under the sway of *zaman*.
- 14 Differing from Heideggerian understanding of ecstatic temporality, Eckhart’s ontological thought is unfolded in a scholastic framework and formulated in both religious and philosophical language, which enables “being” to be revealed in the “now” – a concept which is more intriguing than what is colloquially understood by “time”.
- 15 A helpful summary of the “spark” or the “intellect” can be found in Sermon 69, in *Teacher and Preacher*, in which Eckhart states: “[the intellect] has within itself five properties. The first is that it separates from here and from now. The second, that it is like nothing. The third, that it is pure and unmixed. The fourth, that it is operating or seeking within itself. The fifth, that it is an image”.
- 16 See also Sermons 6 and 15 in the same volume for treatments of the *uncreated light or spark* in man’s soul.
- 17 Quran, Surrat Al Baqarah (2), verse 259.

- 18 This is significant especially since the “death of the soul” occurs in the obscure verse.
- 19 Quran, Surrat Al Imran (3) verse 145.
- 20 Quran, Surrat Al Imran (3) verse 185.
- 21 Through Stein’s work, we can identify a conceptual continuation in the understanding of the intimate relationship between soul and time. Indeed, discussions of the soul and temporality were foundational to Stein’s phenomenology. In fact, and in sharp distinction to Heidegger, Stein’s work was conceptualised by a clear and consistent commitment to the notion of life. One might understand Thomism as a doctrine in which *Act* and *Potency*, *Form* and *Matter* present definitive formative concepts, the foundation of which is beyond question. Or one could understand Thomism to be a doctrine, which relies on the best available philosophy, for interpreting the world with the help of revelation to form a view of the whole that allows for science to be a reality. As per the first view, as we shall see, Stein is not a Thomist. As per the second, she is. The current lifeline of people – characterised by the fragments of past, present, and future in time – is only completed and reaches its perfection in the beatific vision of eternal life (Lebech 2013, 66–69). Life, given and received as a “divine gift” from God, provides the redemptive context for replenishment, redemption, and overcoming sin – which is defined by their isolation and separation from God – and continue to progress towards a permanent condition of timeless divine blessedness within time.
- 22 For Stein, “it now constitutes the power of being itself, a gift to the soul from God. The life of the ‘I’ derives its fullness from the meaning generated by resolute engagement between creation and creator”.
- 23 For more on St. John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*, prologue 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000–07–09, 11–12): “It is better to leave the outpourings of love in their own fullness, that everyone may apply them according to the measure of his spirit and power, than to pare them down to one particular sense which is not suited to the taste of everyone. And though I do put forth a particular explanation, still others are not to be bound by it. The mystical wisdom – that is, the love, of which these stanzas speak – does not require to be distinctly understood in order to produce the effect of love and tenderness in the soul, for it is in this respect like faith, by which we love God without a clear comprehension of Him.
- 24 Stein was acutely aware of the fullness of being which characterised her life and the life of the *Lebenswelt*. This fullness is rooted in love which is profoundly intimate and personal, and is the ultimate condition of possibility of all of the created order. Love is something which personalises the human being and makes him or her a relational or communal creature. Like our personal being which is given, sustained and created anew in freedom, so too must our relations with others, divine and human, be received (*passio*), sustained (*actio*) and created anew (*creatio*). This is what incarnation is about. In a sense, this is what we have been called to do in our very personal creatureliness (Calcagno 1998, 381).

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