The problem of disenchantment: scientific naturalism and esoteric discourse, 1900-1939

Asprem, E.

Citation for published version (APA):
Esoteric Epistemologies

[Even as Socrates called down philosophy from heaven to earth, so in a somewhat different sense it was Swedenborg who called up philosophy again from earth to heaven; who originated the notion of science in the spiritual world, as earnestly, though not so persuasively, as Socrates originated the idea of science in this world which we seem to know. It was to Swedenborg first that that unseen world appeared before all things as a realm of law; a region not of mere emotional vagueness or stagnancy of adoration, but of definite progress according to definite relations of cause and effect, resulting from structural laws of spiritual existence and intercourse which we may in time learn partially to apprehend.]

Frederic Myers, Human Personality, Vol. I, 6

INTRODUCTION: ESOTERICISM 3.0 AND THE PROBLEM OF DISENCHANTMENT

“Western esotericism” is a contested label among historians of religion and culture.¹ Recently, a new historiography has started to emerge in this field, which appears to amend old problems and bridge some of the main differences between earlier

¹ In addition to the problematic relationship between “esotericism” and the academy at large, I am thinking here of the differences and sometimes prolonged disagreements between central scholars within the field, such as Antoine Faivre, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Kocku von Stuckrad, Arthur Versluis, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, and Marco Pasi. I will not treat all these approaches in any detail, nor give a concise overview, but references may be handy for the reader. The best overview of the current situation is found in a critical review article of introductions to the field: Hanegraaff, ‘Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism’. For the central positions, see Faivre, Access to Western Esotericism, 3-47; von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’ (2005); idem, Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, 43-64 (2010); Versluis, Magic and Mysticism (2007); Goodrick-Clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions, 3-14 (2008); Pasi, ‘Il problema della definizione dell’esoterismo’ (2008). Hanegraaff’s position has gradually evolved since the early 1990s, with some major references being Hanegraaff, ‘Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism’ (1995); idem, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 384-410 (1996); idem, ‘Beyond the Yates Paradigm’ (2001); idem, ‘Forbidden Knowledge’ (2005); idem, ‘The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism’ (2010); and finally idem, Esotericism and the Academy (2012), and Western Esotericism (2013).
approaches. It encompasses the most central aspects that have previously been connected with “esotericism”, while promising to place the field as a whole on a sound methodological footing. In terms of a software metaphor introduced by one of the leading spokespersons of this new historiography, the field is about to undergo a system upgrade from “Esotericism 2.0” to “Esotericism 3.0” – with important bug fixes, better interface and increased user-friendliness. In order to avoid a tiresome discussion of theoretical and methodological positions that are now rapidly becoming superseded, it will suffice to say that my discussion in this chapter is situated in the context of the emerging third generation. The new historiography of esotericism is committed to an emphasis on contextualism over essentialism, complexity over simple binaries and stable identities, and historical change over stability. In the present chapter I shall argue that a problem-focused view of disenchantment is particularly well-equipped for responding

2 The key references for this new historiography are found in the latest work of Wouter Hanegraaff, notably Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, and the introductory book, idem, *Western Esotericism*. To these could be added Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, and Asprem & Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*. See particularly the introduction to the latter volume: idem, ‘Introduction’.

3 On this view, first-generation esotericism scholarship (or ”Esotericism 1.0”, to follow Hanegraaff’s software metaphor) was characterised by overtly religionist agendas in the spirit of the Eranos circle. Second-generation scholarship was born with Faivre’s publications in the early 1990s, attempting to introduce a neutral and empirical methodology to the field. Ultimately, however, the second generation was characterised by a swarming number of different approaches, sometimes claiming to follow each other while actually pursuing very different projects, and often implicitly retaining much of the religionist past. The hopes for the third generation of esotericism scholarship – Esotericism 3.0 – is that we will finally shed the dead weight of the field’s religionist past, and succeed in taking up a critical methodology that is on a par with those found in bordering fields such as the history of religion and intellectual history. What is needed for the new historiography of esotericism thus comes close to what Bruce Lincoln formulated for the history of religion already a decade and a half ago: ‘To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline’s claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.’ Lincoln, ‘Theses on Method’, 395.

4 The emphasis on these three points is my own, but they seem to sum up some of the most noticeable trends in the direction that the study of esotericism research is currently taking. Above all, they point toward a significant departure from approaches developed under the influence of religionism (which in this case I will take to include Faivre’s famous “form of thought” definition, which is derivative of religionism even though it has left the explicit agenda behind).
to these “three Cs”. It is designed precisely to focus on the complexity of discourses about knowledge, to pay attention to a greater number of contexts, and to account for change and instability in terms of dialogical and discursive struggles with a problem rather than the “predictable” changes brought about by a process. Furthermore, and vice versa, insights from the new historiography of esotericism are invaluable for studying the problem of disenchantment as it has played out in the early 20th century. Esoteric discourse occupies a curious place in between disciplines: it typically reaches out for religion, science, and philosophy alike. While the days when esotericism had any widely accepted claim of participating in the two latter fields have long since passed, modern esotericism is still frequently bent on bridging, or even unifying, all three. This makes it an obvious site for exploring the problem of disenchantment, for here we can expect to find attempts to harmonise science and religion, to freely engage in speculative metaphysics of nature, and to extrapolate values from scientific facts. In short, we may expect to see stubborn refusals to undergo the intellectual sacrifice, and a will to extend certainty far beyond the pale of “science” as viewed strictly from the angle of Kantian philosophy.

Esotericism has already been implicitly present in most of the preceding discussions. It is not merely a coincidence that revolts against disenchantment in physics during the interwar period were so easily connected with historically “esoteric” systems of thought. Neither does it seem trivial that the new natural theologies so often displayed affinities with theological options that have historically been problematic from the perspective of Western church doctrine, but have remained common in esoteric heterodox movements from late antiquity to the present day. Similarly, the vitalism controversy has a number of connections with esoteric discourse, whether we look at Driesch’s flirtations with spiritualism and the presidencies of Driesch, Bergson, and McDougall in the SPR, or at the deeper historical connections between ideas of vital

---

5 I am assuming here that esotericism is today seen as a normal part of the religious landscape of the West. The most obvious support for such a claim goes through the observation that much late-modern and contemporary spirituality is in some sense “esoteric”, and furthermore that these forms of esoteric religion are becoming increasingly mainstream. See e.g. Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture; Partidge, ‘Occulture is Ordinary’. Examples of esoteric discourse overlapping with science, politics, and other fields of culture today are available in the contributions to Asprem & Granholm (eds.), Contemporary Esotericism.
forces and esoteric discourses on animal magnetism and other exotic forces, fields, and fluids. Psychical research itself emerging from an encounter between esoteric currents and Victorian naturalism. In a sense, it was but taking the claims of spiritualists and occultists seriously and consistently pursuing the scientific dimension of their professed worldviews that gave birth to this peculiar empirical study of psychic powers, etheric forces, and the afterlife. As was argued in chapter seven, psychical research developed in the context of an open-ended naturalism, which included the Victorian esoteric, respected (for the most part) the authority of scientific inquiry, while opposing strict disenchanted. In these closing chapters, we shall finally consider the esoteric context in its own right.

***

We may distinguish three dimensions, or problem areas, of Western esotericism as it appears in the upgraded new historiography: 1) a social dimension concerned with “rejected knowledge”; 2) a worldview dimension concerned largely with enchantment/disenchantedment; and 3) an epistemic dimension concerned with “gnosis”, higher knowledge, and special faculties or methods for obtaining it. All three dimensions concern systems of knowledge and knowing in one way or another. Moreover, they emphasise aspects of “esoteric knowledge” that all have a certain bearing on the problem of disenchantment. I shall discuss each of these aspects in some detail in the following sections, but let me first give a preliminary overview.

Investigating esotericism as rejected knowledge implies a focus on the social dimension of knowledge construction, and especially the role of the emerging Western academy after the Enlightenment. That the disparate currents, figures, and systems that fall under the category of esotericism first and foremost share a status of “rejected knowledge” is a point that has been emphatically made in Hanegraaff’s most recent work. In addition to finding a new form of his torical specificity for esotericism in historically contingent polemical encounters, this dimension also directs attention to

---

6 They are, however, also associated with important practical and material aspects that should by no means be underestimated – especially since the practical dimension has been seriously neglected by earlier research. Some of the practices concerned with obtaining knowledge will be discussed in the following chapters. Cf. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 102-118.

specific social locations of knowledge-construction, setting the socio-historical parameters for discussing the relation between academic knowledge and the esoteric after the Enlightenment. Here there is an obvious overlap with the socio-historical focus on professionalisation and institutionalisation that I have employed in previous chapters on psychical research and natural theologies. I will suggest that the focus on esotericism as a construct arising from processes of identity-formation (polemical and apologetic), first in theological, and then in scientific and philosophical circles during the Enlightenment, can fruitfully be developed further by following the lines I have developed in previous chapters. In particular, the problem-focused view of disenchantment can bring more nuances to light when we look at what happened with this polemical narrative of rejection after the Enlightenment.

Secondly, the worldview dimension concerns specific systems of cosmology, theology, the relation between man, god, and nature, the origin and destiny of the world, and the possibilities for salvation. Incidentally, esotericism has often been seen as a prototypical pre-Enlightenment “enchanted” worldview, connected historically with currents such as Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. This association has resulted in a dilemma that is seldom resolved in a satisfactory manner: either one has a static view of esotericism where later adaptations that appear less “enchanted” have to be excluded, or one must come up with some construct of a “disenchanted esotericism” to account for them. In the latter case, one also needs to choose between either a problematic separation between “proper” (enchanted) esotericism and various “diluted” (disenchanted) appropriations, or abandon the “enchanted worldview prototype” altogether. In the new historiography, the tendency has been towards the latter approach: there is no essential connection between esotericism and enchantment; instead the scholar is interested in the development of esoteric discourses in the context of shifting plausibility structures in Western history. As a result, important strands of post-Enlightenment esotericism have been theorised as “disenchanted esotericism” in the sense that innovations of doctrine and practice have taken place in order to accommodate a broader “disenchanted” culture. This theorisation is problematic and

---


9 Most notably this view emerges from the scholarship of Frances Yates on the “Hermetic tradition”, and Faivre on esotericism as a “form of thought”, the latter described in ways that come close to a check-list of what to expect of an enchanted worldview. Cf. Hanegraaff, Western Esotericism, 5-7.
has, as I will demonstrate in these final chapters, come at the cost of misrepresenting the actual content of much post-Enlightenment esotericism. As far as worldviews are concerned, I will suggest that an analysis of esoteric currents in terms of broader responses to the problem of disenchantment is a more promising way to go. It is, moreover, better equipped to accommodate the new historiography’s heightened awareness of complexity, context, and change.

Finally, the epistemic dimension concerns specific attitudes to the question of how knowledge can be achieved. A focus on claims about unique access to knowledge, an emphasis on special capacities or organs for obtaining knowledge, as well as claims to knowledge that is superior, higher, or possesses special qualities such as enabling salvation and personal illumination, has been emphasised by a number of earlier approaches to esotericism. While it has become clear that an emphasis on “gnosis” or “higher knowledge” cannot provide a sufficient basis for defining “esotericism” as such, it remains indisputable that certain extraordinary and usually extremely optimistic paths to knowledge have been very prominent in esoteric discourses. Together with the worldview dimension, epistemology is also the most obvious area where esotericism is confronted with the problem of disenchantment. How is knowledge understood, how can it be obtained, where does one draw the boundaries of what can be known, and how is the attainment of knowledge related to scientific practice, religious doctrine, and to the axiological concerns of meaning, value, and how to live one’s life? To see where modern esoteric spokespersons stand on the problem of disenchantment, we must consider how the pursuit of “esoteric knowledge” faces these interrelated questions. Disenchantment is optimistic about scientific knowledge of the mechanical interactions of nature, but insists on strong limitations on what can be known beyond the strictly empirical. These limitations, I have suggested, largely follow the Kantian turn in epistemology, which also informed the discourse on agnosticism that arose in the late 19th century. In contrast to these sceptical views on the limits of human understanding, esoteric discourses typically hold that the totality of the cosmos is within reach of those

who have the proper training, or possess the right keys. This put them in conflict with the call for disenchantment, and challenges the notion of a “disenchanted esotericism”.

In the final two chapters I shall provide a few case studies that I think sufficiently illuminate these points, and help us build a more nuanced view on how modern esotericism has responded to the problem of disenchantment. The foundation of those discussions has already been briefly and programmatically introduced above. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss each of the three aspects of esotericism-knowledge-disenchantment in more detail, embedded in previous discussions, and hopefully demonstrating the relevance of introducing the problem-focused view of disenchantment to the new generation of esotericism research.

1 REJECTED KNOWLEDGE: ESOTERICISM AND ESTABLISHMENT

Categories such as “esotericism”, “the esoteric”, “occultism”, and “the occult” have often been connected to notions of rejected and stigmatised knowledge. 11 Sociologists have typically had this aspect in mind when discussing “the occult”, usually with an emphasis on the supposed “deviance” of esotericism. 12 Some historians have also emphasised the deviant quality of the esoteric, most notably James Webb, who placed rejected knowledge at the forefront of his two classic studies, *The Occult Underground* (1974) and *The Occult Establishment* (1976). The first of these books was originally entitled *The Flight from Reason* (1971), signifying that the rejected knowledge circulating in the ‘occult underground’ of the 19th century was primarily rejected by the newly emerged Establishment that emerged from the Enlightenment. Webb furthermore used this focus on rejected knowledge to explain the sometimes extreme heterogeneity of 19th and early 20th-century occultism: this quality arises from occultists’ tendency to mix and blend various bits of knowledge that share merely the status of having been at some point rejected or stigmatised by the scientific, religious, or political Establishment. This is why we find post-revolutionary occultists longing for the *Ancien Régime* on the one hand,

---

11 For the relation between rejected and stigmatised knowledge, see Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 23-29.

12 See e.g. Edward A. Tiryakian (ed.), *On the Margin of the Visible*. 

434
and curious mixes of spiritualism, socialism, and feminism on the other.\textsuperscript{13} Appeal to rejected knowledge is just as much a sociological as a historical explanation of why post-Enlightenment occultism looks the way it does, and we should not be surprised to find that sociologists of religion have similarly emphasised the link between fascination for rejected knowledge and an apparently heterogeneous constellation of beliefs and practices in occult milieus. Colin Campbell’s influential concept of the “cultic milieu” was, for example, based on this dynamic: the cultic milieu, he argued, was concerned mainly with the circulation of ideas that have been rejected by scientific and religious establishments.\textsuperscript{14}

One important legacy of Webb’s work is his acknowledgement of a powerful reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, and a deep fascination for what he calls “the irrational”. Webb saw in this fascination a strong but neglected cultural impulse, with visible consequences in the literature, philosophy, and politics of the 19th- and early-20th centuries. The only major problem with the narrative is its conflict-oriented focus, based on a dichotomy between the rational and the irrational that is much more problematic than Webb assumed it to be. In fact, Webb’s narrative followed the logic of the Enlightenment polemics that gave rise to the “rejected” status in the first place.\textsuperscript{15} While Webb may thus have invited a more complex understanding of modern intellectual history by challenging the triumphalist view of Enlightenment progress, he was only able to do so by introducing the equally simplistic narrative of a “flight from reason” and a revolt against the Enlightenment. Defined in these terms, esotericism is always destined to be oppositional, reactionary, and deviant, and we would not expect

\textsuperscript{13} For such political and ideological bifurcations in post-Enlightenment esotericism, see also Joscelyn Godwin’s useful, but underdeveloped, distinction between an esotericism of “the right” and an esotericism of “the left”. Godwin, \textit{Theosophical Enlightenment}, 204. Cf. Hanegraaff, \textit{Esotericism and the Academy}, 243-244.

\textsuperscript{14} Campbell, ‘The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularisation’. A focus on the deviance of the cultic milieu was taken much further by other sociologists, notably in Jeffrey Kaplan and Hélène Lôôw (eds.), \textit{The Cultic Milieu}. For a criticism of this focus on deviance, which I fully endorse, see Partridge, ‘Occulture Is Ordinary’.

\textsuperscript{15} This pattern is also characteristic of the Frankfurt school’s usual criticisms of “the occult” and esoteric as a form of regressive thought, or even a primal irrationalism intrinsically connected to reactionary politics and totalitarianism. See e.g. Theodor Adorno, ‘Theses against Occultism’. Cf. Hanegraaff, \textit{Esotericism and the Academy}, 312-314.
to find it inside establishment discourses unless the establishment has itself been subverted by the “High Irrationalists”. This was indeed what Webb saw happening in the early 20th century, with the rise of dangerous reactionary politics in an emerging “Occult Establishment”. The discovery of any “rational” aspect that may have been present in occultism, or any less diabolic “esoteric” aspect of establishment discourse, are effectively curtailed by the limits imposed on scholarship along these lines.

These implications are clearly unsatisfactory for this new historiography, which asks for increased attention to complexity. Nevertheless, a focus on rejected knowledge has recently been reconsidered as one of the most important dimensions of esotericism. In Hanegraaff’s recent work, the problematic dichotomy on which Webb based his work is avoided by emphasising the longer and much more complex historical background of the rejection process itself, rather than taking its outcome, and the terms in which it was put during the Enlightenment, as a starting point for defining a field of interest. Thus, while Webb focused on a flight from “reason” as characteristic of post-Enlightenment occultism, Hanegraaff sees a much longer process of exclusion that essentially concerns the overcoming of paganism. This was, however, a philosophical paganism, described by the 17th century scholar Jacob Thomasius as the origin of all heresies. As described by Thomasius, philosophical paganism was founded on a rejection on the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. This rejection led to two aspects that were problematic from the standpoint of Church orthodoxy: a doctrine of the eternity of the world and an emphasis on “enthusiasm” – the latter implying the presupposition that ‘human beings could attain direct experiential knowledge (gnosis) of their own divine nature’. The first phase of rejection thus took place in the Reformation era, when these “pagan” elements were attempted eradicated as unacceptable theological heresies. This process established a connection between a wide range of currents that shared, or were seen to share, pagan elements, thus laying the first foundation for a reified category of the “esoteric”. A second phase of rejection followed with the onset of the Enlightenment,

---

16 This aspect is particularly explored in Webb, The Occult Establishment. A more nuanced picture of these after all very important developments is provided in Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, The Occult Roots of Nazism. Also cf. Mark Sedgwick, Against the Modern World.

17 Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 368-379.

18 Ibid., 105, 370-373. Cf. my discussion at the end of chapter six in the present book.

19 Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 370.
where the category of heresies was reinvented, rather explicitly, in the new inventories of irrational follies and philosophical fallacies.20

Hanegraaff’s new way of describing esotericism as rejected knowledge has two advantages when compared to earlier attempts. First of all, it adds a dimension of historical specificity to the process that was not properly developed in Webb’s account. By paying attention to a substantial dimension of doctrinal content, it shows that knowledge was not rejected arbitrarily. The exorcism of paganism created a pattern. The first element of paganism which Thomasius objected to can be described as theological positions on the lines of “cosmotheism” and “panentheism”, as discussed in chapter six. The derivative element of “enthusiasm” or “gnosis” points towards the purely epistemic dimension of esotericism, which we shall discuss shortly. Hanegraaff’s thesis provides a way for relating these substantial, epistemic, and social issues. The second major advantage of the new way of approaching esotericism as rejected knowledge is that it avoids falling into the trap of simply repeating the structure of Enlightenment polemics. This is achieved by focusing on rejection “in the making” rather than rejection “ready-made”: that is to say, a constructionist approach to the rejection process facilitates reflexivity on the part of the scholar, and avoids reifying and re-applying the categories that were produced by those very processes. This, of course, does not mean that the scholar becomes an apologist of “rejected knowledge”, but it does force him or her to question the naturalness of characteristics that are created in polemical constructions of identity.

***

These considerations have consequences for the way we relate esotericism to disenchantment. As observed by Hanegraaff, the “disenchantment process” relates directly to the two-step exclusion process that gave rise to esotericism as rejected knowledge:

... when Max Weber defined the eighteenth-century process of disenchantment as the disappearance of “mysterious and incalculable powers” from the natural world, he was

---

20 Ibid., 373-374.
describing the attempt by new scientists and Enlightenment philosophers to finish the job of Protestant anti-pagan polemics, and get rid of cosmotheism once and for all.21

‘The attempt was unsuccessful’, Hanegraaff quickly adds, pointing in particular to the Romantic reaction in which cosmotheistic/panentheistic perspectives continued to be explored. Such perspectives were, moreover, adapted to ‘secular conditions’, ‘mutating into strange new forms’.22

Clinging to a conceptualisation of disenchantment as a process may, however, carry with it implications that are not entirely consistent with the principles of the new historiography. Assuming a similar function as “reason” did in Webb’s narrative of rejected knowledge, “disenchantment” becomes a short-hand for the normative position of the Enlightenment establishment. On this view, rejecting disenchantment comes close to Webb’s “flight from reason”, while adapting originally “enchanted” perspectives to it and thereby creating ‘strange new forms’ bears the connotation of the inauthentic and illegitimate hybrid.23 A problem-focused view of disenchantment avoids these tensions. Indeed, my analysis in previous chapters has suggested that post-Enlightenment establishments may not have been all that “disenchanted”; instead, we have seen scientists and philosophers well inside of the “academic mainstream” finding alternative solutions to the problem of disenchantment. This suggests that it was not only the attempt to get rid of cosmotheism that was unsuccessful; the attempt to create a stable disenchanted identity for the Western academy was not completed either.

While this already questions the naturalness of disenchantment as a process, and the role of science and the academy within it, another point is more directly relevant for the new view of esotericism as rejected knowledge. The problem-focused approach encourages looking at the complexity and diversity of responses to the different dimensions of disenchantment, seeing the final outcomes as less automatic or obvious. In line with the methodological individualism outlined at the beginning of this book,24 the outcomes are dependent not on abstract “processes”, but on choices made and strategies adopted by individuals. These individuals may differ wildly between

21 Ibid., 371-372.
22 Ibid., 372.
24 See chapter one.
themselves when it comes to the specific agendas and interests they pursue, even when they appear to be treading the very same “esoteric” grounds. A flight from reason (rejecting the Enlightenment/disenchantment of the world) and a curious “disenchantment of magic” are not our only interpretive categories: instead, we find a myriad of different ways in which the problem of disenchantment is grappled with among those currents, persons, and systems of thought found in the reservoir of the “occult underground”. In following this approach, we must keep our minds open about the actual relations between establishments and undergrounds, between “accepted” and “rejected” knowledge, and – essentially – the question of who gets to decide which is which.

2 Worldviews: The Disenchantment of Esotericism?

While we have noted a tendency in earlier scholarship to equate esotericism with a generally pre-modern “enchanted worldview”, it has become increasingly clear that there is simply no such thing as the esoteric worldview.\(^{25}\) Certain patterns can be recognised, based perhaps on the ideal-typical pagan theologies referred to above, but no final and stable description is possible. The usual suspects of positions rejected by the theological polemics of the Reformation can be identified primarily as worldviews stressing *panentheism*. As discussed in chapter six, panentheism covers positions that try to reconcile the immanence and transcendence of the divine in ways that emphasise the co-dependency of god and the world. Stressing immanence, however, also means that there is an inevitable conflict with disenchantment: the disenchanted world is an autonomous world, one that runs perfectly as clockwork without the disturbance of incalculable forces. Any legitimate theology in such a world must rely on radical transcendence. Under these conditions, it would seem, esoteric spokespersons are faced with a choice: either reject the project of the Enlightenment, or get rid of immanence and “magic” in any substantial sense. This latter requirement would have to be met by any truly “disenchanted esotericism”.

The notion of disenchantment as a process has indeed been used by several recent scholars of esotericism to point out important changes between the worldviews

of modern esotericism and those of earlier times. Adopting a problem-centred view of disenchantment reveals more complexity and variety in post-Enlightenment esoteric worldviews than has typically been granted. This goes particularly for the notion of 19th and 20th century occultism and spiritualism being forms of “secularised esotericism”, adapted to the conditions of a disenchanted world. While more or less fully disenchanted worldviews may be found in some post-Enlightenment systems, and while these do certainly represent a novel direction when compared to earlier forms of esotericism, the vast majority of post-Enlightenment esoteric worldviews appears to have answered the problem of disenchantment in much more ambiguous ways. Thus, for example, Hanegraaff has shown that the Swedish natural philosopher and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), standing on the brink of the Enlightenment, did not, as has often been assumed, primarily represent a continuity of older esoteric ideas, such as the doctrine of correspondences. Swedenborg’s worldview was radically different from earlier esoteric notions: his view of nature followed the mechanistic natural philosophy of Descartes, his anthropology appears to have similarities with that of Hobbes, and his epistemology was inspired by John Locke’s tabula rasa empiricism. Even in Swedenborg’s later visionary phase, he never relinquished these natural-philosophical views, but attempted to harmonise them with an “enthusiastic” theology. He did this in a way that was remarkably well adjusted to the disenchantment of the world, namely, by operating with a complete separation between the natural world and the world of the divine. In fact, Swedenborg’s notion of correspondences was designed precisely to bind these separated spheres together by analogy. Swedenborg started his Hieroglyphic Key to Natural and Spiritual Arcana by Way of Representations and Correspondences by establishing that the concept of conatus in the natural world, denoting motion (literally “effort”, or “striving”), corresponded to the concept of “will” in the human world. These, finally, corresponded to the concept of “divine providence” in the higher world. Such correspondences did however not mean

26 Most notably Hanegraaff, ‘How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World’; idem, Western Esotericism, 125-6; but also von Stuckrad, Western Esotericism, 133-135; Alex Owen, The Place of Enchantment, 1-16, passim.
27 E.g. Hanegraaff, Western Esotericism, 125-126.
28 Cf. Hanegraaff, Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant.
29 See ibid., 3-11.
that there was a direct link between the three worlds, so that, for example, mechanical conatus was but an expression of divine providence, or that human will was bound by the action of god. Relations were mirrored, but there were no direct causality between the worlds. The worlds were kept strictly apart, ensuring the complete mechanical self-sufficiency of nature. In fact, Swedenborg became convinced that natural science could tell nothing whatsoever about the human or the divine levels, and thus excluded any discussion of nature as such from his later theological writings. He followed the dictums of disenchantment all the way, and held natural theology to be an impossible endeavour. When Swedenborg himself was able to lay out all the secrets of heaven, and describe the correspondences between the separate worlds, that was solely due to a continuation of revelation, an initiative on the part of the divine that had chosen to bestow higher secrets upon the Swedish philosopher. A mere mortal could never have gained such knowledge on his or her own initiative.

Comparing Swedenborg with earlier esoteric writers, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are truly dealing with an Enlightenment innovation that results in a fully “disenchanted” form of esotericism. Nothing is left of “living nature”, panentheism is dispensed with for some form of theism, and the promise of natural theology is scrapped. The principle of correspondences, which had been a way to postulate mediating connections between all things in the cosmos, links that are neither materially causal nor the result of invisible “occult forces”, are nowhere to be found. Instead, something quite different is expressed by that same word, namely a set of purely analogical links between concepts on three different levels of reality that otherwise have no points of contact with each other. Unlike its Renaissance forbear, Swedenborg’s concept of correspondences could hardly be utilised for magical purposes, whether the making of talismans with correspondences to astrological principles, or

---

30 Ibid., 8.

31 In fact, it appears legitimate to ask whether Swedenborg properly belongs to esotericism at all. Perhaps the best reasons for including him are to be found in the reception of his thought, and the social position of Swedenborgianism after the Enlightenment, rather than in any substantial feature of his doctrines, or historical relation to older esoteric material.

healing though herbs or minerals with appropriate corresponding connections. Such natural and astral magic was rendered just as impossible in Swedenborg's disenchant Christian esotericism as in the best Enlightenment philosophy.

While we can thus say that Swedenborg exemplifies a response to the problem of disenchantment that embraces its most important dimensions, separating mechanical nature from a transcendent spirit world, later esoteric spokespersons have solved this problem in very different ways. Thus, I find it problematic to take Swedenborg's example as a model for others attempting to 'adapt esotericism to a disenchanted world', as Hanegraaff appears to do:

it [Swedenborg's system of correspondences] proved highly influential. From the nineteenth century on, the fundamental notion of two “separate-yet-connected planes” of reality became a bedrock assumption of spiritualism and occultism, because (as was already the case in Swedenborg) it protected spiritual realities from scientific falsification and disenchantment. We are not dealing here with the holistic universe of Plotinian or Renaissance correspondences, but with an essentially dualistic concept (modeled partly on Cartesian dualism but partly also on Kant's distinction between a noumenal and a phenomenal world).

That such a protection against scientific falsification through the adoption of a strictly dualistic worldview became a bedrock assumption can certainly be questioned from a historical point of view. Rather than insulating the spirit-world from empirical reality, 19th century spiritualists are frequently seen to emphasise the potential of their practices to empirically demonstrate the presence of continuous contact between the

33 For a venerable compendium of such uses of correspondences, see in particular the two first books of Cornelius Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, on "natural magic" (e.g. magic in the sub-Lunar world) and "astral magic" (pertaining to the supra-Lunar world of the planets and the Zodiac) respectively.

34 Hanegraaff has demonstrated that Swedenborg even appears to be in complete agreement with Kant's epistemology, expressing that it is entirely impossible for humanity, under normal circumstances, to gain knowledge of any transcendent realities that there might be. The closeness of the two is remarkable in light of Kant's famous polemic against Swedenborg, in which Kant had taken liberties to cover up his own earlier fascination for the Swede's system, even opting to deliberately misspell his name. See Hanegraaff, *Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant*, 104-107.


“material” and “spiritual” worlds, arguing that the truth of the matter can be settled by scientific means. The ambition is quite the opposite of Swedenborg’s Cartesian/Kantian approach: instead of protecting the spirit world from scientific criticism, steps are made to bring it directly into the purview of empirical science. Meanwhile, occultists working with ritual magic continued to stress the possibility of creating direct material effects in this world through magical means, sometimes even through the adoption of systems of correspondences that are much closer to Agrippa than to Swedenborg. One only has to think of the elaborate procedures for producing and consecrating talismans by the use of divine names, astrological magical squares, and the employment of “correct” metals, as taught in the late-Victorian Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; these talismans were produced and used for this-worldly magical purposes such as healing. 37 Ritual magicians’ common interaction with demons, angels and other spiritual beings, literally understood to be independently existing spiritual entities, furthermore attests to a worldview in which different “planes” are closely knit together. 38 In some cases, most notably that of Aleister Crowley, we even see concentrated attempts at making the assumed magical realities as empirically available as possible, in the explicitly stated interest of putting an end to other occultists’ evasive attitude towards methods of falsification. 39

Even if we look at some of those who have on paper been most directly influenced by Swedenborg’s system we find that they are typically not interested in keeping the material and spiritual worlds separate in any strict sense. The spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910), for example, explicitly adopted Swedenborg’s notion of correspondences, but showed little interest in continuing his dualistic project. 40 Davis’ ambition was to establish a ‘Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse’ rather than keeping the two worlds neatly separated. ‘There is no matter more incontestably demonstrated than the communion of men with spiritual existences’, Davis writes, thus implying not only that the spirit world can be a subject of true, scientific knowledge

37 For examples of the practical magical operations of Golden Dawn members, see e.g. Ellic Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 104-109; cf. Asprem, *Arguing with Angels*, 57-68.
38 For this point, see e.g. Asprem, *Arguing with Angels*; Pasi, ‘Varieties of Magical Experience’.
39 Cf. Asprem, ‘Magic Naturalized?’.
41 Ibid., 377.
(through ‘demonstration’), but that such true knowledge has already been established beyond reasonable doubt. Stressing the importance of animal magnetism and artificial somnambulism for intercourse between the worlds, it also becomes clear that special material functions of the brain and body are involved with spirit contact, thus implying that there are indeed causal links between a “material” substratum and intercourse with the spirit world.\textsuperscript{42} Again in stark contrast to Swedenborg, the consequence is that material techniques can be employed to induce and actively reach out to gain knowledge of higher worlds. Direct knowledge of the spirit world is within the reach of humanity, and not dependent on divine initiative. In one of the final chapters of the edited compendium of Davis’ life’s work, \textit{The Harmonial Philosophy}, entitled ‘The Certainty of Spiritual Intercourse’, we thus read, without ambiguity: ‘Intercourse between minds in this world and minds in the other is just as possible as oceanic commerce between Europe and America, or the interchange of social sympathies between man and man in daily life’.\textsuperscript{43} Nothing now seems left of the dualistic separation between ‘this world’ and ‘the other’. The relation between the two worlds is likened to the relation between the continents; separated by oceans they may be hard to travel between, but there is no doubt about the possibility of such crossings. The comparison with ordinary “interchange of sympathies” is even more revealing: spirit communication is merely a more complicated form of intersubjectivity, in principle no less problematic than the communication between living creatures in this world. While Swedenborg’s philosophy held that all minds are already in the “spirit world”, even when incarnated in the physical world, it is clear that the worlds Davis talks of are rather different: the two worlds that are to be bridged are those of the “everyday” world in which people move and think and feel, and the “other side” inhabited by deceased persons and other spiritual beings. These two worlds are like two continents, and can be crossed by those who know how.

Adopting a dualistic separation of worlds may have been a “philosophically correct” way to save magic in modernity, withdrawing it from any possible rational criticism and making it thus compatible in principle with a “disencharnded world”. It would be analogous to Weber’s intellectual sacrifice, requiring a leap of faith since no rational and empirical reasons for belief are provided. Swedenborg, who was himself a

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 379-385.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 403.
sophisticated scientist and philosopher steeped in Enlightenment thought, may in this sense be reconstructed as an ideal example for later occultists to follow. However, this would be very much an idealisation of how history should have looked like, rather than how it actually does look: post-Enlightenment esotericists simply did not follow the example of the Swedish natural philosopher. Their intentions were sometimes quite the opposite of Swedenborg's. The refusal of modern occultists to play by the rules of disenchantment must be seriously acknowledged, and so must its consequences: since post-Enlightenment esotericists so often did not separate the worlds properly, but rather tended to emphasise the empirical consequences of their beliefs and practices, the threat of disconfirmation and a conflict with the empirical sciences have remained serious challenges that esoteric spokespersons have had to grapple with.

The problem of disenchantment appears, in short, to have been met in different ways by different esoteric spokespersons. A protection of the spirit world from disenchantment and scientific rationality is certainly not a necessary component of post-Enlightenment occultism; indeed, it appears to be quite rare.\textsuperscript{44} I argue that post-Enlightenment esoteric discourse typically emphasises an empirical and would-be "scientific" dimension. Rather than insisting on a separation of worlds, occultists typically assume the continuity of nature. The worldviews of 19\textsuperscript{th} - and early 20\textsuperscript{th} - century occultists often appear to be in the current of "open-ended naturalism" that we have discussed in earlier chapters, rather than in the disenchanted mode of separating the knowable from the unknowable. While Cartesian dualism and Kantian epistemology might have been strategically reasonable options for occultists to follow, I hold that in actual practice they more often came to challenge the fundamentals of those Enlightenment epistemologies. Most of modern esotericism in fact reads as a wholesale rejection of Kant's critical philosophy, both its epistemology and its moral philosophy. This did not mean that occultists rejected all contemporary intellectual traditions,

\textsuperscript{44}This statement is based solely on the author's impressions rather than on a systematic study of 19\textsuperscript{th} century occultism in all its forms and facets. A comprehensive study of a representative selection of occultist authors' relation to disenchantment would be a welcome contribution to the academic debate on the disenchantment of magic/secularization of esotericism. For previous contributions, see e.g. Hanegraaff, 'How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World'; Asprem, 'Magic Naturalized'; idem, \textit{Arguing with Angels} (especially pp. 69-82); Marco Pasi, 'Varieties of Magical Experience'.
however: instead, I argue that they could challenge the Kantian limitations of knowledge by playing on pre-existing tensions within naturalistic discourse.

The occultists’ emphasis on a naturalistic and scientific discourse, challenging rather than accepting the “two worlds”-thesis of Kantians and liberal agnostics, has caused occultists to run into the very same problems faced by open-ended naturalists in psychical research. By emphasizing empirical dimensions of esoteric knowledge claims rather than insulating them from the reach of science, the field also opened the door for falsification.

3 EPISTEMOLOGY: GNOSIS AND THE EXPANSION OF REASON

The discussion of esoteric worldviews and the problem of disenchantment has led us directly to the questions of esoteric epistemologies proper: how is higher knowledge actually thought to be achieved in esoteric discourses? An emphasis on the acquisition of unique knowledge through equally unique channels has often been part of definitions of esotericism. Antoine Faivre’s definition of esotericism as a form of thought emphasised what we might call certain cognitive habits, which included a reliance on analogical thinking (“correspondences”) and a creative use of the imagination (“mediation/imagination”). The latter element was clearly related to Henry Corbin’s more ontological concept of the mundus imaginalis, denoting an “order of reality” that could be reached through the faculty of the imagination.45 We might silently pass by the many attempts to define esotericism in terms of “secrecy”. These too emphasise a form of epistemology, but in a purely sociological sense, which is far more universal than the kind of knowledge relations that concern us here.46 More relevant to our concerns are the emphasis on ‘claims to higher knowledge’, as laid down in Kocku von Stuckrad’s conceptualisation of “esoteric discourse”, and Hanegraaff’s distinction between “reason”,

45 Corbin, ‘Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal’. For the relation between Corbin and Faivre, see Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 349-355.
46 That is not to say that a sociological approach to secrecy is uninteresting in its own right, nor that it is irrelevant to the field of esotericism; it clearly is relevant, and in fact deserves to be developed further. Some useful references include Georg Simmel, ‘The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies’; Hugh Urban, ‘Elitism and Esotericism’; idem, ‘The Torment of Secrecy’; idem, ‘The Secrets of Scientology’; von Stuckrad, Locations of Knowledge, 54-59. For some effects of the esotericism/secrecy connection when reversed in the context of conspiracy culture, see Asbjørn Dyrendal, ‘Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers’.
“faith”, and “gnosis” as three ideal-typical approaches to knowledge. The latter distinction will be of relevance for our discussion, so we should clarify the technical meanings it implies.

“Reason” is defined here as claims to knowledge that rest on the two principles of communicability (the claim is communicated in precise discursive language) and verifiability (it is formulated such that the truth or falsity of the claim can, in principle, be independently checked by others). In this special sense, reason is exemplified by the standards for knowledge claims characteristic of science and scholarship, but also of all pragmatic “know-how”, everyday knowledge where reliability has an undeniable practical relevance. By contrast, “faith” denotes a type of knowledge claim that remains equally communicable, expressed in clear discursive language, but which content lacks the intersubjective verifiability demanded of “rational” statements. This category would be best exemplified by dogmas that have to be taken on the authority of revelation. By extension, one could consider that many other claims are de facto taken on the basis of faith (or “confidence”) in authority rather than by actual independent verification of the claim. This is in fact how most people, by practical necessity, interact with any field of knowledge of which they are not a specialist. Including these examples in the category of “faith” would, however, miss the point of the distinction: claims based on “reason” differ from claims based on “faith” not by reference to why people happen to accept or reject a certain claim, but rather whether or not independent dis-/confirmation of the claim is possible in principle. Finally, “gnosis” stands in contrast to both reason and faith: these “claims” (to the extent that they can still be considered as such) are not only withdrawn from any possible independent corroboration by others, but are also described as a non-discursive, experiential type of knowledge, which cannot be expressed in clear and unambiguous language. It constitutes a type of knowledge that is (rhetorically) said to transcend reason, being beyond its grasp and thus also impossible to impart to others except by veiled, symbolic language, or through administering ways

47 For the former, see e.g. von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’, 88-92; idem, Locations of Knowledge, 43-64; for the latter, Hanegraaff, ‘Reason, Faith, and Gnosis’.

48 The following account is based on Hanegraaff, ‘Reason, Faith, and Gnosis’; idem, Western Esotericism, 87-101. While my account tallies with Hanegraaff’s conception of this distinction, I have emphasised certain nuances that I find particularly important, and which moreover appear to have remained implicit or ambiguous in the original formulations.
for achieving the same direct experiential knowledge. The knowledge itself, however, is deemed impossible to communicate directly or verify through other means.

The possibility of attaining gnosis, or absolute, higher knowledge of a supra-rational kind, is a typical promise of esoteric worldviews. This phrasing must be noted carefully: the focus is not on definite claims about superior, higher knowledge that has already been obtained; instead, it is the promise that higher knowledge can in principle be achieved by individual human beings that matters. This means a slight, but significant, departure from von Stuckrad’s notion of “esoteric discourse” as claims of higher knowledge. The primary focus should be on the prescribed ways and methods of achieving such knowledge, rather than on any claim about what has been revealed.49 However, it also implies that we must be very careful not to give the impression that we refer to gnosis as really being an experiential, non-discursive, non-verifiable form of knowledge as such: that would be methodologically unsound, since, by definition, there can be no traces of any such knowledge for the scholar to access. What we do have is the discursive statement that such (non-discursive) knowledge is possible, or has been attained; possibly, there are also claims about how such knowledge can be achieved by others. On top of these, there are the potentially significant social effects of making such claims, including the elevations of status and power that might be achieved by establishing oneself, discursively, as the bearer of a non-discursive, non-verifiable higher knowledge, the guardian of a treasure chamber that no one has ever seen except by borrowing the guardians’ own keys.50 All these effects can be studied, but it means that we are studying discursive claims to gnosis, construed as a rhetoric of “ineffability” and “non-verifiability”, and not “gnosis” as an actual type of knowledge.51

49 Which was a secondary, but nonetheless important, dimension to von Stuckrad’s discursive model; cf. ‘Western Esotericism’, 91-92; idem, Locations of Knowledge, 60-64.

50 This latter point reminds us of the function of secrecy as a monopolisation of knowledge, making of it a commodity that can function as symbolic capital and be exchanged for social capital (as, for example, in secret societies). It also reminds us of the experiential claim’s strategic discursive function. For the former, see e.g. Simmel, ‘The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies’, 464; Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’. For the latter, see Olav Hammer, Claiming Knowledge, 331-440.

51 Olav Hammer’s work on “epistemological strategies” in modern Western esotericism may in fact be seen as a complete discursive redefinition of the faith-reason-gnosis typology: what he refers to as narratives of “personal experience” comes close to a rhetoric of “gnosis”, while “terminological scientism”
Disenchantment defines the antithesis of the worldviews that have, historically, supported esoteric epistemologies stressing gnosis. While this has caused esoteric spokespersons since the Enlightenment to face the problem of disenchantment, leading to a number of innovative worldviews, the problem is even more acute for epistemology proper. Disenchantment concerns the boundaries of reason, and embracing it fully means that any “higher” realities must remain off limits for human rational inquiry. According to the disenchanted point of view, it is only by an intellectual sacrifice that “knowledge” – or at the very least conviction – of such things can be held. On a superficial reading, one might suspect that gnosis should still remain possible in such a world; after all, gnosis is thought to complement reason by bursting through the boundaries that limit its reach. Those who claim gnosis would actually agree that reason as such is limited: claiming higher knowledge through gnosis is not the same as claiming rational and scientific knowledge about the divine, as Weber’s “charlatans” and “self-deceived” individuals would do. If analysed closer, however, the problem is more complicated. From a theological as well as an epistemological point of view, the problem with claims to gnosis is that they suppose an innate potential in human beings to attain such knowledge by their own initiative, thus actively transcending the boundaries of this “disenchanted” world. This means that an absolute intellectual sacrifice is never needed in the first place. One can rely on one’s innate capacity for gnosis to attain the knowledge that reason cannot grasp, and one can get it without having to trust the revelations of a supreme being.

This subtle problem with gnosis in a disenchanted world may be illustrated by returning briefly to the solution provided by Swedenborg. As we saw, Swedenborg embraced disenchantment in most relevant respects, and imposed a clear separation between the natural world and the spiritual world. As one would expect from a philosophical mind valuing consistency, this had epistemological implications. As Hanegraaff has noted with some surprise, Swedenborg was at heart a Kantian:

---

is a strategy referring to “reason”. “Appeal to tradition” can be construed as a form of “faith”-oriented “knowledge by authority”. Cf. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*. 

449
Remarkably enough, Swedenborg appears to have been in complete agreement with Kant’s basic epistemology: it is impossible for human beings to discover the truth about heaven by themselves, for our common human faculties are simply inadequate. But whereas Kant concludes that therefore we cannot attain any knowledge of heaven, Swedenborg claims that the abyss has been bridged “from the other side,” that is to say, by the Lord himself. Kant and Swedenborg agree that humanity cannot discover the truth; but unlike Kant, Swedenborg claims that it can be revealed to human beings. He knows this because it has happened to himself.52

Swedenborg’s disenchanted view may first appear as a kind of personal gnosis, but it is important to note that he considered his visions (‘things heard and seen’) to have been achieved by divine initiative – not by personal exaltation. Theologically speaking, Swedenborg looks more like a prophet within a faith-based system: there is no promise that other people can experience the truth for themselves, as that would require faculties of the soul that simply do not exist. They can, however, faithfully follow the doctrines revealed to Swedenborg from the other side. While the prophet and his revealed doctrines would definitely appear heterodox, the theological explanation of how knowledge had been achieved is entirely in line with theism. It relies on the active initiative of the creator.

If Swedenborg had to fall back on a theistic model, leaning in the end more on “faith” than on “reason”, most occultists and other modern esoteric spokespersons appear to have taken a quite different view on things. Occultists have usually been inclined to distrust revelation (divine initiative), and emphasise a hidden human potential for extraordinary knowledge. Human beings can attain knowledge about higher realities, by their own initiative, either by training certain “occult” faculties of the mind, or through the use of special ritualistic, magical keys. We may think of “sensitives” going into a trance and thereby achieving contact with spirits and visions of other worlds, or the use of mesmeric techniques, inducing states of “artificial somnambulism”.53 We can think of psychical researchers and spiritualists theorising about telepathic powers and clairvoyance, whether across space and time, or between

52 Hanegraaff, Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant, 104-105.
53 Numerous examples of this from the early 19th century are collated and discussed in Adam Crabtree, From Mesmer to Freud. See also the peculiar case of Friederike Hauffe (the “seeress of Prevorst”) and her “magnetic” physician, Justinus Kerner; Hanegraaff, A Woman Alone.
the worlds. Then there are the techniques for astral travel, as practiced both by
theosophists and by ritual magicians, and the use of grand magical ceremonies to call
forth spirit entities, converse with angels and demons, or send the magician on a
disembodied journey to higher realms. There is even the use of hallucinogenic drugs
to achieve “higher” insights through manipulating the biochemistry of the brain, in what
may be called “entheogenic esotericism”.

While all these practices for attaining higher knowledge entail manipulative
actions in this world, emphasising the agency and initiative of the individual, it is
intriguing to note that the notion of gnosis remains quite problematic for most of them.
Of course, a perfect match with historical reality should not be required from an ideal
type. Nevertheless, many of the extraordinary knowledge practices associated with
post-Enlightenment esotericism appear less like gnosis and more like expansions of
reason, in the special sense defined above: in both theosophical and ritual-magical
practices of astral travel, for example, the practitioner is usually bent on describing his
or her visions discursively, in accurate detail (not symbolically or allegorically), as if
writing ethnographies of other worlds. Furthermore, the visionary will often
emphasise corroboration by external evidence (especially when astral travel is
performed within the ordinary world), or even devise methods for other practitioners to
independently verify the claims that have been made and report back on their findings.
These practices seem best explained as extensions of “reason”, in directions that defy
the disenchanted call for an intellectual sacrifice. Occultism, quite contrary to insulating
higher knowledge from rational criticism by way of a separation of “two worlds”, is
more often characterised by an aspiration to reject the intellectual sacrifice, and extend

---

54 Examples were discussed extensively in previous chapters.
55 For the practice of astral travel in first- and second-generation Theosophy, see e.g. John Patrick
Deveney, Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society; cf.
Charles Webster Leadbeater, The Astral Plane. For astral travel in the context of ritual magic, see e.g.
Francis King (ed.), Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy; cf. Owen, The Place of Enchantment;
chapters two and six; Asprem, ‘The Golden Dawn and the O.T.O.’; idem, Arguing with Angels, 63–68.
56 See references in previous note.
57 E.g. Hanegraaff, ‘Entheogenic Esotericism’.
58 A clear example of this ethnographic style is found in Leadbeater, The Astral Plane. See, however, also
the accounts of astral travellers in the tradition of the Golden Dawn, as collected e.g. in King (ed.), Astral
Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy.
reason to the higher worlds. Moreover, and following the thrust of my general argument, this expansion is made possible by relating reason to an open-ended naturalism, rather than to the epistemic limitations of disenchantment. I suggest that we see answers to the problem of disenchantment that amount to a partial naturalisation of esotericism.\textsuperscript{59} Such naturalisation entails new negotiations of reason and gnosis, informed by naturalistic (rather than strictly Kantian) epistemology, but often in opposition to established naturalistic ontologies. We shall return to this discussion in light of specific examples in the two following chapters.

\textbf{***}

There is, however, another aspect of esoteric claims to knowledge that is not so easily grasped by the reason-faith-gnosis distinction, namely the wide range of epistemic strategies that could be labelled "esoteric hermeneutics".\textsuperscript{60} It is, perhaps, symptomatic that the examples we have been discussing so far, and the conceptual tools that have guided us, have focused on facts and explanations, glossing over the preoccupation of much esoteric discourse with meaning, signification, and understanding. Have we been misled by post-Enlightenment esoteric spokespersons' frequent alignment with the natural sciences to ignore their relationship to the epistemology of the humanities, that is, to hermeneutics? As Hanegraaff has recently pointed out, modern esotericism has displayed a remarkable lack of interest in modern research in the humanities, entirely disproportionate with its unprecedented enthusiasm for natural science.\textsuperscript{61} I suggest that this imbalance is deceptive: while it may superficially look like esotericism is closer to natural science than to humanistic scholarship, from an epistemic point of view the opposite is really the case. Esoteric methods for obtaining knowledge and understanding have typically been concerned with interpretation of meaning rather than explanation of facts. Why, then, the disregard for current scholarship in the humanities? Perhaps this is exactly what we would expect: the very proximity in

\textsuperscript{59}This is a generalisation of an argument I first articulated with reference to Aleister Crowley's conception of magic. See Asprem, 'Magic Naturalized?'.

\textsuperscript{60}A previous attempt to operationalize this concept can be found in von Stuckrad, \textit{Locations of Knowledge}, 89-113. While von Stuckrad focuses explicitly on textuality, my understanding is, as will be seen, somewhat broader.

\textsuperscript{61}Hanegraaff, \textit{Western Esotericism}, 92.
method makes the humanities a more serious challenge to esoteric claims about meaning and interpretation than the natural sciences are. The new interpretive methods that have been designed for scholarship in the humanities since the early modern period, from precise philology to source-driven archival research, from the practice of hermeneutical suspicion to advanced methods for content analysis, have completely undermined some of the most central methods by which meaning and knowledge has typically been constructed in esoteric discourses. In the modern humanities, the esotericist is likely to be confronted with disconfirmations of interpretation and with methodologies that are radically opposed to his own approach to knowledge. He is less likely to be confronted in this way by the natural sciences. Instead, physics, chemistry, and biology have continued to provide numerous exciting “matters of fact”, begging to be interpreted. Often enough, scientists have themselves encouraged such interpretation through their popularisation strategies, or their own attempts to do the job of philosophers and theologians.62

A brief consideration of esoteric hermeneutical practices is important for situating esotericism in the broader landscape of post-Enlightenment knowledge cultures in which the problem of disenchantment looms. It provides another avenue for exploring the mode of knowledge production in esoteric milieus vis-à-vis the separation between facts and values, and conflicts over the reach of naturalism. We need to remember that modern hermeneutics was itself developed in this very context, in the struggle of the humanities to define its scientific identity and create methodologies that were distinct from those of the natural sciences.63 Conflicts concerning the methodology of the humanities have by no means ceased, or culminated, in a clear scholarly consensus.64 It is not so surprising, then, that similar problems have continued to be

---

62 Abundant examples of this were seen in Part Two of this book. See also von Stuckrad, Locations of Knowledge, 89-91.
63 These debates are extremely complex. See e.g. Charles R. Bambach, Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism.
64 With the exponential numerical growth of the Western university sector and of academic publishing since the Second World War, the question of what constitutes the proper methodology/ies of the humanities has become more complex than ever before. Avoiding a discussion about the vast range of methodological positions in the humanities today (which would require a multi-volume work in its own right) it will suffice to note that the somewhat naïve distinction between an “interpretive” (Verstehende) humanities and an “explanatory” (Erklärende) natural science, not to say the notion of “two worlds” in the
sustained also *outside* of the humanities strictly speaking, including in the circles of amateur scholars that partake in esoteric discourses.

The background for what I term esoteric hermeneutics lies in scholarly practices that were common prior to the mathematicization of nature and the advent of modern textual criticism. It is related to the general “episteme” of the Renaissance: the readability of nature,\(^65\) the so-called “emblematic worldview”,\(^66\) and, significantly, to the practices of correspondence, analogy, and concordance.\(^67\) Furthermore, it is connected to the ancient wisdom narratives of *philosophia perennis* and *prisca theologia*, functioning as master narratives guiding interpretations and comparisons of textual material.\(^68\) As far as hermeneutic practices are concerned, we may think about the logic of similitudes, and the interpretation of natural occurrences as signatures, or omens, pregnant with significance. In a more technical sense, we may think of specific exegetical methods that have been developed in order to reveal hidden layers of meaning, and create harmony in texts that appear on the surface to be in conflict with one another. Of major significance in this respect are the hermeneutical techniques developed in Jewish kabbalah, imported and translated to a Christian context by such scholars as Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522), and Guillaume Postel (1510–1581), and developed in yet new directions by natural philosophers such as John Dee (1527–1608/9) and Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689). Sometimes, such hermeneutical methods have been connected with academy famously suggested by C. P. Snow, are hardly satisfying for grasping the complexity of research in the humanities. To mention only a couple of examples, we currently see the development of approaches based on cognitive psychology and neuroscience gaining ground in the humanities, particularly in anthropology and religious studies, suggesting fruitful combinations of “explanation” and “interpretation”; furthermore, the development of new quantitative approaches in historical research have been made possible by the digital revolution of recent decades. The latter field appears to have a significant potential, and is only now starting to become institutionalised with its own journals, such as *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (est. 2007), and *Journal of Digital Humanities* (est. 2011). While the predictive “psychohistory” of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* series remains out of sight for now, it is clear that there has been a quantitative and explanatory potential in the humanities that is only now being systematically developed.


\(^{66}\) William Ashworth, 'Natural History and the Emblematic Worldview'.

\(^{67}\) E.g. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10-14.

\(^{68}\) On this theme, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 7-12
contemplative techniques in quests for what could be considered experiences of gnosis; other times, it could be expanded to the study of nature itself. In all cases, they provided interpretive techniques for uncovering higher meanings that were veiled or hidden from plain sight. As such, it is important to point out that one does not have to go to Jewish and Christian kabbalah to find esoteric hermeneutical approaches to the study of scripture: on the contrary, scholastic traditions of biblical scholarship had already developed a sophisticated apparatus for reading texts on a variety of levels by the middle ages. A number of rules for interpreting scripture were recognised by the 12th century, many of which can be traced back to the early church fathers. Eventually, four senses of scripture became canonical in the Western church’s approach to exegesis: a literal sense (sensus literalis); an allegorical sense (sensus allegoricus), concerning symbolic meaning in view of church doctrine; a moral sense (sensus moralis), which pertained to the moral conduct of the individual; and the higher anagogical sense (sensus anagogicus), which pertained to higher spiritual truths, the nature of God, and the secrets of eschatology. Through the practice of anagogy, the scholastic theologian of the pre-reformation Roman church had access to what must essentially be seen as an “esoteric” hermeneutical tool for revealing hidden layers of higher meaning in textual material.

How can the concept of esoteric hermeneutics help us shed light on Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment struggles with the problem of disenchantment? Returning to one of our main examples in this chapter, the threshold figure Swedenborg, we might make an additional observation concerning his reformed doctrine of correspondences. I mentioned that these were designed to explain some sort of connection between the material, human, and divine worlds, without postulating any causal chains between them. Thus we get correspondences of meaning between concepts performing similar functions on each level, such as “will” in the human sphere,

---

69 I am thinking, for example, of the medieval kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, whose techniques for “ecstasy” included the use of Hebrew letter permutations, e.g. temurah and notarikon. See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*.

70 As, for example, in some of the natural-philosophical work of John Dee. On this topic, see especially Nicholas Gulee, *John Dee’s Natural Philosophy*; cf. Deborah Harkness, *John Dee’s Conversations with Angels*.


72 Ibid., 15-74.
and “providence” in the realm of the divine. In view of the considerations mentioned above, it is tempting to say that Swedenborg rejected an esoteric epistemology – made impossible in a disenchanted world – while adopting a type of esoteric hermeneutics by which truth concerning higher realities could be perceived both in nature and in man, by applying the right interpretive keys. While the keys themselves were “revealed”, their use for reflecting on the divine comes close to an anagogical reading of nature.

As a heuristic proposal, I suggest that we can distinguish three different tendencies in the uses and adaptations of esoteric hermeneutics in the post-Enlightenment period. First, there is the continuation of hermeneutical strategies more or less in the same vein as in earlier contexts; this would include the continuation of correspondence thinking, the postulation of analogical connections, and the uncovering of esoteric layers of meaning from textual sources by the use of techniques such as gematria, temurah, and notarikon. The second trend is the one exemplified by Swedenborg: the use of a hermeneutical discourse to avoid the problems of a factual and explanatory discourse. While Swedenborg’s own attempt was based on a sophisticated philosophical position, developed already before his “visionary period”, other examples can be seen as rhetorical evasions, often developed after an “explanatory” attempt has failed. Examples could include certain tendencies in modern astrology, including the adoption of Jung’s concept of “synchronicity” as a non-causal connecting principle, and, for that matter, the “hermeneutical” turn in psychical research and parapsychology that we discussed in a previous chapter. The third and final tendency for esoteric hermeneutical strategies in the post-Enlightenment period goes in quite the opposite direction: this is the attempt to reform traditional hermeneutical strategies in ways that make them more precise, making them into critical tools for checking the veracity or authenticity of esoteric claims. While esoteric hermeneutical techniques have traditionally been designed to open up and expand the possibilities of interpretation, this approach develops techniques that limit such possibilities in the interest of precise knowledge. This latter strategy could be considered a rationalisation of esoteric hermeneutics, and I will argue that it brings the hermeneutical aspect of esoteric epistemologies into contact with the general tendency towards naturalisation that I have suggested above.
4 CONCLUSION: ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN NATURALISATION AND DISENCHANTMENT

I have argued that esoteric spokespersons have typically answered the problem of disenchantment by rejecting the call for an “intellectual sacrifice” in order to obtain knowledge of metaphysics, morals, and values. The assumption that “higher knowledge” can be achieved by human beings in this life, whether through exalted gnosis or expansions of reason that defy the limitations imposed on it by Enlightenment authorities, has remained central to esoteric discourse. There is a genuine epistemological conflict here: according to the modern esotericist, Enlightenment philosophers had simply failed to recognise that interaction between this world and the higher planes was still possible. They would refer to hidden sense organs in the subtle bodies, the reality of extrasensory perception, or the possibility of manipulating the brain to create special “states” in which exalted knowledge could be achieved. Kantian “disenchanted” epistemology had simply presented a too limited picture of humanity’s capacity for knowledge, by starting from erroneous suppositions about our sensory organs, the nature and constitution of the human mind, and ultimately the relation of the mind to the cosmos at large. While esoteric spokespersons generally postulated rather exotic ways of attaining higher knowledge, one should be careful to note that other positions challenging the Kantian limitations on knowledge were being explored in intellectual contexts such as German idealism and even in quarters of Victorian naturalism. For example, the “philosophy of the unconscious” became a central dimension of such positions, mediating between epistemological concerns in German Naturphilosophie, psychological research, and the practices of occultists and spiritualists.

Once it has been asserted that higher knowledge is possible, and no intellectual sacrifice necessary, many options are still available for explaining why this is so and how knowledge can be achieved. Worldviews may differ, as may the details of each esoteric epistemology. I have argued that the most significant trend in post-

73 For some of these contexts, see e.g. Frederick Beiser, German Idealism; Terry Pinkard, German Philosophy 1760–1860; Glenn A. Magee, Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition; F. M. Turner, Between Science and Religion; Bernard Lightman, The Origins of Agnosticism.

74 See especially Eduard von Hartmann, Philosophy of the Unconscious (German original: Philosophie des Unbewussten [1869]). Cf. Henri Ellenberger, The Discovery of the Unconscious; Adam Crabtree, From Mesmer to Freud; Alan Gauld, A History of Hypnosis.
Enlightenment esotericism has been to base the rejection of disenchantment on essentially naturalistic grounds. It may be useful to recall the discussion of the relations between naturalism and disenchantment in chapter two. There I suggested that we describe “naturalism” as a continuum of positions ranging from a strict “ontological naturalism”, via various intermediate positions that are mildly “supernaturalistic” but remain consistent with varieties of epistemological or methodological naturalism, before ending up with the “objectionable form” of supernaturalism that contradicts both ontological and epistemological naturalism. From this arrangement, we saw that it is possible to reject disenchantment while remaining within the naturalistic spectrum. Vice versa, positions that are in principle acceptable from the disenchanged perspective are not tolerated from the perspective of naturalism. The disagreement concerns the intellectual sacrifice: while such a “leap of faith” is the only way to retain “religion” in a presumably disenchanted world, it also means that one will have abandoned the naturalistic project altogether.

In previous chapters I have referred to positions that refuse the intellectual sacrifice but remain within the naturalistic spectrum as “open-ended naturalisms”. Open-ended naturalism does not deny the possible existence of beings and worlds other than the “natural” ones, but insists that the only way in which solid knowledge can be established about such realities is by focusing on their interaction with the natural world, drawing conclusions from such interaction by the critical use of reason and evidence. When I speak of the “naturalisation of esotericism”, I mean the attempt (whether successful or not) to legitimise esoteric claims to knowledge in the context of such an open-ended, epistemological naturalism. The precise disciplines and methods referred to in each case may vary greatly – from psychology, to physics, to literary criticism – but the basic naturalistic assumption about how to build knowledge remains.

While naturalised esotericism refuses the intellectual sacrifice demanded by disenchantment, it typically accepts disenchantment’s epistemological optimism and multiplies it a hundredfold. Not only can humanity gain perfect knowledge of this world, but the exact dimensions of heaven and hell are also open for inspection. There is no gap that must be bridged “from the other side”, for humanity already possesses the tools to pierce the veil of this world and uncover arcane secrets. To the extent that these

75 Cf. figure 4 in chapter two.
secrets can also be communicated to the uninitiated, and even be independently verified by others, such knowledge claims appear as extensions of “reason”. Understanding the naturalistic aspect of occultism may thus provide an important correction to perspectives focusing on claims to gnosis, and help us understand the place of “higher knowledge” in modern esotericism generally. In the final two chapters I will follow this track by analysing some of the most significant esoteric authors of the early 20th century. These display different uses of “science” and different ways to answer the problem of disenchantment. Emphasising the attainment of higher knowledge and making abundant references to “science” these spokespersons exemplify the diversity of modern esoteric knowledge practices.