The problem of disenchantment: scientific naturalism and esoteric discourse, 1900-1939
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I slept with faith and found a corpse in my arms on awakening; I drank and danced all night with doubt and found her a virgin in the morning.

Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Lies* (1913), chapter 44.

**INTRODUCTION: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO HIGHER KNOWLEDGE**

Esoteric claims to higher knowledge are usually about much more than stating superior facts, no matter how exotic or unusual. The attainment of gnosis will typically be inscribed in a soteriological narrative concerned ultimately with salvation: higher knowledge tells the initiate not only how the world works, but also how to act in it and how to achieve liberation from its constraints. Its wisdom speaks of values, ethics, and metaphysical realities as much as of higher factual truths. Yet, these normative concerns are not simply left to dogma or opinion; they are considered the subject of real knowledge. No intellectual sacrifice is needed, or so it is suggested, to know the “good” and the “beautiful”; just as there can be a science of external nature, there can be a science of hidden essences, of higher truths, and of ultimate purpose. What, exactly, such an esoteric science would look like, and how it would be related to the “exoteric” sciences, is a question that has been answered in different ways by modern esoteric spokespersons.

In this final chapter we shall consider two modern prophets emerging out of different but related strands of late-19th century esotericism: Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).¹ These two figures are central to modern

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¹ For biographical information on Steiner, I rely on the recent and thorough biography by Helmut Zander, *Rudolf Steiner*, the extremely detailed reference work in Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland* (two volumes), and on the 1928 English translation of Steiner’s autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. See also the two excellent entries in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*: Cees Leijenhorst, ‘Steiner, Rudolf’; idem, ‘Anthroposophy’. While Steiner’s autobiography is unreliable when it comes to details of
esotericism, but have, to the best of my knowledge, never been the subject of a comparative analysis. Yet, intriguing parallels exist between the two authors, as well as subtle differences that go to the heart of the problem of disenchantment and the relation between “reason”, “faith”, and “gnosis”. The parallels are striking. Both broke out from pre-existing esoteric traditions and created novel syntheses: Steiner from Theosophy, and Crowley from the occultist ritual magic of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Both treasured science highly, and had broad and serious intellectual interests in fields much more reputable than occultism. Both came to found new religious communities, and both saw their esoteric and religious insights as having the highest importance for the political and moral future of a troubled and war-ridden Europe. Finally, both took up the ambition of democratising esoteric knowledge by reaching out to the people, and making higher knowledge accessible to the masses. While their strategies for doing so were quite different, as were their relative successes, they do have one thing in common that makes them particularly relevant to the present discussion: rather than merely communicating the results of their illuminated insights, both Steiner and Crowley aimed to set forth the methods for achieving higher knowledge. They authored didactic material, designed to instruct would-be initiates on how to perceive higher knowledge for themselves. In this literature we find sources fit for an intriguing comparison of two influential esoteric epistemologies of the early 20th century.

While the abovementioned parallels provide enough common ground to justify a comparison, the most promising prospect for such an approach lies in uncovering their differences. Steiner and Crowley came out of different intellectual and cultural traditions, which inevitably formed their perspectives on higher knowledge and its attainment. Steiner, who was Crowley’s senior by fourteen years, was formed by the intellectual cultures of Vienna and Weimar. His intellectual masters were the German idealists and Weimar classicists – above all Goethe, whose natural-scientific works he

chronology, it is valuable as a source for Steiner’s self-perception in later years. For Crowley, the standard biographies used are Lawrence Sutin, Do What Thou Wilt, and Kaczynski, Perdurabo. For an important discussion of the problems with Crowley biographies, see Marco Pasi, ‘The Neverendingly Told Story’. The problems Pasi identified were, unfortunately, not remedied by the more recent biography, Tobias Churton, Aleister Crowley (2011). See also the essays collected in Henrik Bogdan & Martin P. Starr (eds.), Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism.
edited in the 1880s but also Schiller and Fichte. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were important influences on Steiner as well, and he would describe his encounter with the latter in rather pathetic terms in his autobiography. 

Crowley, for his part, spent three years at the University of Cambridge in the mid-1890s and developed an intellectual fascination with Victorian naturalism in the style of T. H. Huxley and Henry Maudsley, the evolutionistic anthropology of James George Frazer, and eventually the psychological and philosophical theories of William James. Steiner’s intellectual background is distinctly German, as much as Crowley’s is distinctly British. A comparison between the two thus sheds light on an important question: How do different cultural and philosophical contexts influence perspectives on higher knowledge?

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While both Crowley and Steiner were immersed in contemporary academic discourses, the nature and degree of their involvement differs significantly. While Steiner was only 21 years old and lacking formal academic credentials, he was invited through his personal network to be a co-editor of the scientific works of Goethe. This project became a springboard to a formal academic career. In 1886 he published a major work on the epistemology implicit in Goethe’s worldview (Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der goetheschen Weltanschauung mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Schiller). In 1891 he was awarded a PhD from the University of Rostock with a dissertation on Fichte, later

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2 ‘There he lay on a lounge enveloped in darkness, with his beautiful forehead – artist’s and thinker’s forehead in one. It was early afternoon. Those eyes which in their blindness yet revealed the soul, now merely mirrored a reflection of the surroundings which could find no longer any way to reach the soul. One stood there and Nietzsche knew it not. And yet one could have believed, looking upon that brow permeated by the spirit, that this was the expression of a soul which had all the forenoon long been shaping thoughts within, and which now would fain rest a while. An inner shudder which seized my soul may have signified that this also underwent a change in sympathy with the genius whose gaze was directed toward me and yet failed to rest upon me. The passivity of my gaze so long fixed won in return a comprehension of his own gaze: his longing always in vain to enable the soul-forces of the eye to work.’ Steiner, The Story of My Life, 181. This experience moved Steiner to write the book Friedrich Nietzsche: Ein Kämpfer gegen Seine Zeit (1895).

3 On these intellectual influences on Crowley’s esoteric writings, especially of the Victorian naturalists, see Asprem, ‘Magic Naturalized’. For the influence of James, see Pasi, ‘Varieties of Magical Experience’.
published as *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft* (1892). These intellectual endeavours, dealing with problems of epistemology and free will in a post-Kantian, idealistic framework, led to the publication of Steiner's major philosophical work in 1892, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*. He was thus established as a philosopher well before 1900, taking active part in the academic discourse of his time. The position he sought to develop on topics such as the philosophy of science, ethics, and free will straddled the traditions of classicism and romanticism, and provided an intellectual foundation for his later esoteric involvement.\(^4\) Importantly for our present concerns, Steiner's academic philosophy was founded on an explicit opposition to Kantian epistemology. As he wrote in the opening of his doctoral dissertation in 1891, ‘Contemporary philosophy is suffering from an unhealthy belief in Kant’.\(^5\) Against such ‘Kant-Glauben’ Steiner sought an epistemological position in which human knowledge knew no boundaries, and no separation between the world of facts and the world of values was needed. In short, he had formulated a philosophical rejection of the intellectual sacrifice demanded by disenchantment, long before identifying with any esoteric system of thought.

For Crowley, the situation was rather different. He studied philosophy and English literature in the Moral Science Tripos at Cambridge between 1895 and 1897, but spent more time pursuing extracurricular activities ranging from sex and poetry to chess and mountaineering. He never received any formal degree, nor did he publish any academic paper or monograph. He did, however, stay updated on contemporary intellectual fashions, and participated in public debates on matters of politics, culture, art, and religion through his numerous essays in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *English Review*, and in newspapers such as *Daily Mail* and *New York Times*.\(^6\) While Steiner was an accomplished academic writer, Crowley was a self-educated essayist, enjoying significant personal relationships with members of the intelligentsia. Remaining essentially an autodidact, Crowley absorbed central ideas from current scholarship, and constantly sought to rethink and revise his esoteric practices in light of them. Thus, for

\(^4\) For the ambiguous place of romanticism and Naturphilosophie in Steiner’s thought, see Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, vol. 1, 907-928.


\(^6\) For a bibliography of Crowley’s contributions to magazines and newspapers, see Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 676-682.
example, his view on magic was at one point dominated by a strictly (ontologically) naturalistic understanding of neurological changes in the brain, while he would later supplement his understanding by the much more romantic idea of “genius” as found in William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*.7

Moreover, Crowley showed a consistent interest in taking scientific *methodology* seriously as a tool for esoteric practice.8 In following this agenda he was clearly related to the English SPR, which he would have encountered while studying in Cambridge. The psychical researchers’ attempt to study “occult” phenomena within the parameters of an open-ended naturalism provides an epistemological context for Crowley’s later innovations. Crowley’s attempted rehabilitation of magic was strongly influenced by the epistemological possibilities as well as strictures imposed by Victorian naturalism on claims to knowledge in general. The comparison between Steiner and Crowley thus becomes one of esotericism in the light of two different epistemological contexts: Steiner’s post-Kantian German idealism, versus Crowley’s British naturalism. How do these different contexts affect the pursuit of higher knowledge and the relation between reason, faith, and gnosis?

**1 TWO CAREERS IN OCCULTISM**

**STEINER: PHILOSOPHER, THEOSOPHIST, ANTHROPOSOPHIST**

Rudolf Steiner is undoubtedly best known as the founder of the anthroposophical movement; together with his followers he was the originator of Waldorf pedagogy, biodynamic farming, eurythmic dance, and anthroposophical medicine. But the road there was long, and went through a number of phases. A brief biographical sketch is necessary to appreciate the chronology of the events, and see the gradual development from early interests in natural science, through young adult interest in philosophy, to the embrace of occultism, and the subsequent mature development of a new esoteric system in the form of anthroposophy.

Steiner was born on February 25, 1861, in the village of Kraljevec in present-day Croatia, then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as the son of a telegraph operator and a

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8 Asprem, ‘Magic Naturalized’.
former housemaid.9 The family moved frequently during Steiner’s upbringing, and his experience with education was unusual: in the village of Neudörfl outside of Vienna he went to a school without age-separated classes and was able to rush through it three years ahead of time to attend the “Bürgerschule” in Wiener Neustadt. After a brief period of home-schooling by his father, he was sent to “Realschule”, and soon excelled in the exact sciences, especially mathematics and physics.10 In 1879 the whole family moved to Inzerdorf, closer to the city of Vienna, so that Steiner could continue his studies of natural science at Vienna’s Technische Hochschule. There he followed courses in mathematics, physics, botany, zoology, and chemistry, as well as German literature. In 1882, while still pursuing these studies, Steiner was suggested by his German teacher, Julius Schröer, as a co-editor for a new edition of Goethe’s collected works. Schröer was an important influence on Steiner’s future career, as he was also Steiner’s guide to the canon of German philosophy.11

Steiner was about to embark on his career as an idealist philosopher of science, and in the middle of the 1880s he would start publishing his first major philosophical works. It was also at the end of that decade that he would make a first acquaintance with occultism. At the end of 1889 Steiner was introduced to a circle of Theosophists active in Vienna, and became a regular participant in their café meetings. The heart of the group was the pioneer feminist and Theosophist Marie Lang; another prominent member was Friedrich Eckstein, a Viennese Jew, Marxist, Theosophist, and personal friend of Sigmund Freud.12 Through these acquaintances, Steiner would be introduced for the first time to the Theosophical literature, such as Blavatsky’s recently published *Secret Doctrine* (1888), and Alfred Sinnett’s influential *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883).

Steiner had thus already come into contact with intellectual representatives of occultism when he was writing his PhD dissertation and developing his *Philosophy of Freedom*. However, his proper career in occultism would only begin a decade later,

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9 There has been some confusion as to the date of Steiner’s birth, as he gave the date 27 February in his autobiography. Helmut Zander has however convincingly argued that 25 was the date of his physical birth, while 27 was the date of his christening – which Steiner would later come to describe as his esoteric, *spiritual* birth. See Zander, *Rudolf Steiner*, 13.


11 Ibid., 29-32, 43-45.

12 Ibid., 61-64.
shortly after the turn of the century. Steiner had now relocated to Berlin, where he was going through a political phase, involved with radical socialist and anarchist circles, absorbing Haeckel's monism, and publicly advocating atheism. Against this background, Steiner was invited in the autumn of 1900 to give a lecture on Nietzsche to a group of Theosophists. Steiner’s radicalism must have impressed the occultists, for this became the first of a series of frequent lectures for the German Theosophical Society. Continuing first with a lecture on his intellectual hero, Goethe, Steiner suddenly and unexpectedly switched to a quite different type of subject matter for his lectures. In 1901, he set out on an exploration of German Christian mystics, from Meister Eckhart to Valentin Weigel and Jakob Böhme. He also lectured on other major figures in the history of Western esotericism that had been active in the German cultural sphere, notably Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Giordano Bruno. The result of this sudden and intense immersion into mysticism and esotericism was the publication of his Mystik im Aufgange des neuzeitlichen Geisteslebens, appearing at the end of 1901.

This publication marked the emergence of Steiner the Christian mystic, but it was also the beginning of his career as a Theosophist. In the same year, Annie Besant had published her book on Esoteric Christianity, which Steiner quickly absorbed. In October 1902, Besant came to Berlin to found a German section of the Adyar branch of the Theosophical Society. In her opening speech to the German members, she proclaimed a policy of “Theosophical plurality”, which stressed that every nation was free to adopt and develop the principles of Theosophy to their specific national character. Steiner, who was appointed General Secretary of the new German section, would follow this encouragement to the full.

In the years that followed, Steiner kept busy developing his own take on Theosophy. He read up on the “neo-Theosophical” literature that was coming out of the Adyar group, including Leadbeater’s work on clairvoyance, astral travel, and esoteric

13 Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 1, 533-537.
14 This was not the first official Theosophical group in Germany, however. The original society had opened a section in Germany in 1894, just one year before the international schisms in Theosophy broke out, and the American branch separated from the Adyar branch. The American branch then opened a new section in Germany in 1896, but this one soon dissolved into new schisms, before the prominent German Theosophist Franz Hartmann founded Internationale Theosophische Verbrüderung in Munich in 1897. For an overview of Theosophy in Germany, see Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 1, 75-346.
physiology, and set out to write his own fundamental works on esoteric epistemology.\footnote{Cf. the useful chronology compiled in Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 1, 546.} His first publication in this regard was another introduction to Theosophy written for the German audience, entitled *Theosophie* (1903). The publication of this book can be seen as the completion of Steiner’s “conversion” to Theosophy: that is, it was the final stage of his transformation from a “serious” philosopher to a wholesale occultist.\footnote{Ibid., 545, 550-570.} The book was followed in 1904 by the first edition of *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der Höheren Welten*, and the visionary *Aus der Akasha-Chronik*. Both of these works first appeared in serialised form in the new German Theosophical journal, *Lucifer-Gnosis*, founded by Steiner and appearing for the first time in January 1904. Another of Steiner’s major theoretical works in occultism was created in this period, namely *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*, finally appearing in book form in 1909. As Helmut Zander points out in his thorough and systematic treatment of Steiner’s work, the four books mentioned above in effect developed four central strands of Steiner’s Theosophy.\footnote{Ibid., 569.} An esoteric anthropology was presented in *Theosophie*, based on a further development of pre-existing Theosophical doctrines about subtle bodies; *Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss* placed the anthropology in a broader esoteric cosmology; *Aus der Akasha-Chronik* developed an “emic historiography”, giving detailed descriptions about the life of human beings in long lost lands such as Atlantis, Lemuria, and Hyperboraea, rivalling the accounts found in Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*. Underlying all these works, however, was a peculiar focus on “supersensible knowledge” (*übersinnlichen Erkenntnis*), the proper function, attainment, and use of which was explored in *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der Höheren Welten*. It is in this work that a proper esoteric epistemology is developed, and it is this text that will serve as our main primary source later in this chapter.

These works clearly belonged within a Theosophical world of ideas, but tensions between Steiner’s thought and the doctrines coming out of Adyar were building up. The Adyar society continued its emphasis on the “Oriental” tradition, while Steiner was careful to avoid anything eastern as far as he could.\footnote{This struggle can be seen clearly by comparing the later editions (1914, 1918 and later) of *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse* to the earlier ones published in *Lucifer Gnosis*.} Theosophy had caused a ‘parting

\footnotetext[15]{Cf. the useful chronology compiled in Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 1, 546.}
\footnotetext[16]{Ibid., 545, 550-570.}
\footnotetext[17]{Ibid., 569.}
\footnotetext[18]{This struggle can be seen clearly by comparing the later editions (1914, 1918 and later) of *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse* to the earlier ones published in *Lucifer Gnosis*.}
of East and West’ in occultism already in the 1880s, as those who favoured “Western” traditions of Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, and ceremonial magic felt left out of the increasingly “Oriental”, but also anti-magical leanings of the Theosophical Society. A similar dynamic was now at play within the neo-Theosophy of the Adyar society. In addition to increasing doctrinal divergences, there was an accumulation of organisational differences and power struggles following Besant’s ascension to the presidency of the Adyar society in 1907. The event that finally ripped “Berlin” and “Adyar” apart, however, was the campaign started by Besant and Leadbeater in 1909 to promote the young Indian boy Jiddu Krishnamurti as the future Messianic “world teacher”. Based on Leadbeater’s clairvoyant exploration of karmic cycles and reincarnations, and on Besant’s heterodox Christology, the Adyar society decided that Krishnamurti was destined to become a spiritual teacher on the level of Siddhartha Gautama and Jesus. While the world teacher campaign proved to be a highly successful one for the Theosophical Society in general, leading to a strong increase of its membership through the 1920s, it also had its casualties. Steiner voiced his scepticism of Krishnamurti to Besant during a meeting in Budapest in 1909, but the message fell on deaf ears. Eventually he decided he would have no more of it: Steiner formed the Anthroposophical Society in 1912 and took most of the German-speaking Theosophists with him. Besant consequently cut the Germans off from the Society, making sure to denounce Steiner as an agent of the “black generals” and a conspirator of destructive Jesuit plots while she was at it. Somewhat ironically, it had only taken a decade for Besant’s “pluralistic” policy of national diversity to result in yet another Theosophical schism.

The Anthroposophical movement was born. Its headquarters were soon relocated to Dornach in Switzerland, where construction of the Goetheanum, a complex of buildings based on Steiner’s “spiritual” architectonic principles, commenced in 1913. From the end of the Great War and until Steiner’s death in 1925, Anthroposophy developed into a strong cultural force, spanning fields such as schooling, political ideology, religious observance, medicine, architecture, and agriculture. In contrast to


20 Zander, Rudolf Steiner, 202-203, 205-208. Cf. idem, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 1, 147-172.

21 Zander, Rudolf Steiner, 208.
the increasingly messianic “esoteric Buddhism” of the Adyar Theosophists, according to which Jesus Christ had only been one among many divine incarnations, the German anthroposophical movement retained a more traditional emphasis on the uniqueness of the Christian revelation. Steiner’s Christology was, however, quite heterodox, and hardly compatible with official church doctrine.22 Among the eccentricities of Steiner’s esoteric Christianity was the notion of two different Jesuses being involved in the incarnation process – the “Nathanic” and “Solomonic” Jesus – born to separate pairs of parents that were both named Mary and Joseph, and belonging to two different lines of descent from David.23 The association of Christ with the “light-bringer” Lucifer was undoubtedly another controversial point, accompanied by a reinvention of Satan in terms of the Zoroastrian divine antagonist, Ahriman. Breaking with the official dogma of existing churches did not matter, however, for in the early 1920s Steiner’s movement established its own church, the “Christian Society” (Christengemeinschaft), with new sacraments, new liturgies, and new ecclesiastical arrangements.24

As so many of his generation, Steiner became increasingly politicised by the Great War. His esoteric speculations about the spiritual character and destiny of the world’s races and nations became more defined in light of the historic clash of Europe’s great Empires. In the wake of the Central Powers’ unexpected defeat, Steiner’s Anthroposophy became a part of the general Lebensreform and youth movement in Germany. Its relation to the Weimar Republic’s frail democracy was ambiguous to say the least: Steiner’s teachings had a clear authoritarian ring, and developed a rather crass polemic against “materialism”, “liberalism”, and cultural “degeneration”. All of the above were cast as ailments of a fallen Germany, and the anthroposophical movement readily offered its remedies.25

22 On Steiner’s Christology, see Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 1, 781-858.
23 In addition to this innovation, apparently designed to harmonise the accounts in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mathew, Steiner followed Besant’s esoteric Christology in separating Jesus from Christ and holding that the earthly Jesus made himself a vessel for the “Christ spirit” from the day of his baptism onwards. Cf. Besant, Esoteric Christianity; see also the discussion in James A. Santucci, ‘The Conception of Christ in the Theosophical Tradition’.
25 On the politicisation of Steiner and anthroposophy, see Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, vol. 2, 1253-1356.
Anthroposophy's answers all tended in the direction of “organicism”, and were based on Steiner’s “spiritual science” (*Geisteswissenschaft*); they belong to the sort of Weimar republic *Zeitgeist* that we have discussed in previous chapters. Each of the individual anthroposophical initiatives can be considered a part of this larger ideological constellation. For example, anthroposophical medicine was developed to contrast with the “materialistic” (and hence “degenerate”) medicine of the establishment. It based itself on all sorts of pre-existing alternative therapeutic practices, especially homeopathy, but also hydrotherapy, air- and light cures, various dietary therapies, and “traditional” herbal remedies. Added to these was a spiritual superstructure borrowed from Theosophy, as well as other esoteric therapeutic practices, such as Christian Science. Similarly, the agricultural reforms implicit in anthroposophy’s biodynamic farming was not only a form of ecological farming, but based itself on a “holistic” conception of organisms that took into account the esoteric dimensions of plant life postulated by Theosophy (such as the life-mediating ether body), but also the influence of the heavens – through the correspondence between metals and planets – on growth. Finally, the first school of the extremely influential Waldorf pedagogy was founded in Stuttgart in 1919. The pedagogical system itself built on an eclectic mixture of reform- and classical pedagogy, filtered through a Theosophical anthropology, and Steiner’s own theories about reincarnation, spiritual development, and the acquisition of knowledge. The Waldorf schools spread internationally after Steiner’s death, and remain the single most successful anthroposophical initiative today.

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**CROWLEY: PROPHET OF A NEW AEON**

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26 Ibid., 1461-1463.

27 On the latter, see especially Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*.

28 Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland,* vol. 2, 1586-1590. For this development, see also the work of Steiner’s students and successors, notably Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899–1961), Lili Kolisko (1889–1976), and Agnes Fyfe (1898–1986). Later contributions to biodynamic farming have emphasised what they claim are “non-causal” astrological influences on plant growth; see e.g. Fyfe, *Moon and Plant*; Nick Kollerstrom, *Astrochemistry*.

29 See ibid., 1364-1454.
In terms of strictly organisational success and mainstream appeal, Steiner's work clearly overshadows that of Crowley. While hundreds of thousands of people have been directly involved with the organisations Steiner founded, whether through Waldorf schooling or the purchase of biodynamic agricultural products, only a few thousand people can today be counted as followers of Crowley's religious and esoteric innovations.\(^{30}\) Measuring and comparing influence is hard, however, and there is little doubt that Crowley has been of unprecedented importance for the post-war development of occultism: fields such as Wicca, modern paganism, religious Satanism, and “chaos magic” would not have looked the same or even existed at all without his work. Crowley's contribution to the development of modern esotericism consisted above all in two things: the foundation of a new religious framework, and a thorough reinterpretation of magic. Appeals to science were crucial for both.

Aleister Crowley, Christened Edward Alexander, was born on 12 October 1875 in the small Spa town of Leamington in Warwickshire, England. His parents were independently wealthy due to the ownership of a family brewing business. They were also dedicated members of the Exclusive Brethren, a branch of the evangelical denomination the Plymouth Brethren. This denomination had been founded by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) in the early 19\(^{th}\) century; and in view of Crowley's later career as a religious figure and prophet of a new age, it is significant that Derby's Plymouth Brethren provided a distinctly dispensationalist theology, meaning that there was a strong focus on God's shifting relationship to humanity through different historical epochs ruled by different covenants.\(^{31}\) It was also a strongly millenarian movement, believing that rapture and tribulations were imminent, in preparation of the Second Coming of Christ. According to Crowley's own testimony, these ideas were thoroughly internalised at a young age, to the extent that after playing alone in the garden one summer afternoon (at the age of eight or nine), he had believed that the hour of judgement had come:

\(^{30}\) According to present-day representatives at the Goetheanum in Dornach, the Anthroposophical Society today has active societies in 50 countries, with a total of 52,000 members; the total number of anthroposophical institutions around the world, however, were estimated as high as 10,000. See Robin Schmidt, 'History of the Anthroposophical Society'.

\(^{31}\) On this topic, see Bogdan, 'Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon'. Cf. Sutin, \textit{Do What Thou Wilt}, 17-18.
He [Crowley speaking of himself in the third person] came back to the house. It was strangely still and he got frightened. By some odd chance everybody was either out or upstairs. But he jumped to the conclusion that "the Lord had come", and that he had been "left behind"... The child was consequently very much relieved by the reappearance of some of the inmates of the house whom he could not imagine as having been lost eternally.  

As he was reaching the rebellious age of his early teens, Crowley’s mother got into the habit of naming him “the beast”, apparently believing him to be the antichrist. This, too, the young boy internalised, and the beast of Revelations would remain a stable part of Crowley’s identity throughout his life.  

In the year of his 20th birthday Crowley went to Cambridge and enrolled for the Moral Sciences Tripos at Trinity College. This was the beginning of a period of personal exploration and experimentation: within three years Crowley would become an active chess player, an aspiring poet, a mountaineer, and importantly, would discover his bisexual orientation and have his first homosexual experiences. Cambridge was a stimulating intellectual environment. One of Crowley’s life-lasting intellectual heroes, the anthropologist James George Frazer, was a fellow at Trinity, and so were some of the founding members of the SPR, namely Henry Sidgwick and Frederick Myers. Moreover, Crowley’s arrival in Cambridge coincided with the famous testing of the medium Eusapia Palladino, which was carried out at Myers’ Cambridge residence in August and September of 1895. The SPR was in other words not only present, but very active in Cambridge when Crowley entered university. Intellectuals were hotly debating the Society’s tests of Palladino in newspapers and magazines such as The Daily Chronicle, The Westminster Gazette, The Liverpool Daily Post, The British Medical Journal, and the Spiritualist publication Light. A scientific and naturalistic discourse on the occult was, in short, prominent in Cambridge in the mid-1890s. Given this public interest in occult

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32 Crowley, Confessions, 38.
33 Sutin, Do What Thou Wilt, 20-21; Crowley, Confessions, 43.
37 See ibid., 54.
phenomena, it is perhaps not surprising that Crowley took a first, but rather superficial, interest in occultism while at Cambridge.

A deeper involvement with occultism only began in the summer of 1898, during a mountaineering holiday in Switzerland. His father had died the year before, and Crowley acquired an inheritance of some £40,000 – a significant amount of money in the late 1890s. While spending some of it in a bar in Switzerland, Crowley ran into the British industrial chemist Julian Baker. Attempting to challenge and impress the chemist with his knowledge of alchemy, Crowley soon discovered that his drinking buddy possessed a far more comprehensive knowledge of the subject than he did. Impressed, Crowley tracked down the chemist the next morning and implored him for initiation. Baker revealed that a secret group existed in London, and that he could introduce Crowley to someone who was much more versed in the ways of magic than himself when they returned to England. The man was another chemist, George Cecil Jones, and the group was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The meeting with Jones in October 1898 proved a turning point in Crowley’s life, and the start of his career in occultism. Jones first suggested new study material for Crowley, introducing him to The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, a 16th- or 17th century grimoire (or magical book) that had just recently been translated into English and published by the eccentric occult scholar Samuel Liddell “MacGregor” Mathers. Baker and Jones also trained Crowley in the techniques of astral travel and the use of certain magical rituals designed for protection. In November 1898, he was initiated into the Golden Dawn.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had been founded in 1888, and can be seen as part of the “hermetic reaction” to Theosophy in late-Victorian occultism. It was

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38 For these events, cf. Sutin, Do What Thou Wilt, 52-54; cf. Kaczynski, Perdurabo, 52-53.
39 With the most modest estimate, Crowley’s inheritance gave him a “historic standard of living” equal to £3,540,000 in today’s society. As before, figure has been calculated using measuringworth.com.
40 See Kaczynski, Perdurabo, 53-55.
41 Mathers had translated this ritual instruction from manuscripts in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal and published it in 1898. See Mathers, ed., The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage. On the manuscript sources, the translation, and the criticism, see Owen Davis, Grimoires, 180-183.
42 Kaczynski, Perdurabo, 55.
43 Again, cf. Godwin, The Theosophical Enlightenment, 333-362; Tillett, ’Modern Western Magic and Theosophy’, 28-29. The historical standard work on this order remains Ellic Howe, Magicians of the
founded by a small coterie of London-based Freemasons and occultists, most of whom had possessed dual memberships in such esoteric organisations as the Theosophical Society, the Rosicrucian masonic group Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (SRIA), and Anna Kingsford’s Hermetic Society. This was true for the two key founders, the coroner William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925) and the abovementioned MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918). The circumstances surrounding the Order’s foundation, and particularly its claim to an “authentic” Rosicrucian lineage through obscure secret chiefs in Germany, has been the matter of much dispute, and I will not repeat the story here. As far as its occult teachings are concerned, the Golden Dawn had a distinct focus on training its candidates in the actual practice of ritual magic. This was something of a novelty. While there were certain earlier examples of groups in which magic had been taught and practiced, the Golden Dawn was unique both in its social structure, and its innovative fusion of magic, ceremony, and personal spiritual development. The Theosophical Society, on its part, had discouraged or directly prohibited the practical use of magic altogether.

The Golden Dawn was divided into two sections, one “Outer” and one “Inner”: through the five grades of the Outer order the candidate was gradually taught the theoretical aspects of the Golden Dawn’s magical system, while it was only in the Inner order that the actual practice of magic was taught. Crowley, having received some prior tutoring by Jones and Baker and devoured all the material given him, appears to have been disappointed with the first so-called “Knowledge Lectures” he received in the Golden Dawn. For concise overviews, see especially Robert A. Gilbert, ‘The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn’; Asprem, ‘The Golden Dawn and the O.T.O.’.

An immediate precursor is found in the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, but this society appears to have existed as a correspondence order only: members received instructions by mail, and never met physically as a group. An earlier example can be found in Martinès de Pasqually’s (1727–1774) 18th century Order of Élus Coëns, which had a focus on practical theurgy and angel magic, but on the whole, it must be said that 19th century occultists tended to view the teaching and practice of magic as a private affair. See Asprem, ‘The Golden Dawn and the O.T.O.’. See also Godwin, Christian Chanel, and John Patrick Deveney (eds.), The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor.

For a description and discussion of the Golden Dawn’s initiatory system, and the place of magic in it – both theoretical and practical – see Asprem, Arguing with Angels, 49-54, 57-68.
Golden Dawn. The first lectures asked the student to memorise Hebrew letters, the sephirot of the kabbalistic “tree of life”, alchemical and astrological symbolism, and other basic components of esoteric semiotics. If the formal programme of the order left him bored, Crowley nevertheless found something valuable when he was introduced to another initiate, Allan Bennett (1872-1923). Bennett, who would later be instrumental in bringing Buddhism to Britain, was an accomplished magician in the Golden Dawn system, and possessed personal notes of all the order’s teachings. Having been convinced to share Crowley’s flat, Bennett became another important teacher and accomplice in magic for the young aspirant.

With such private tutelage Crowley could advance quickly through the order’s grades, and less than two years after his first admission he was knocking on the gates to the Inner order. His application to proceed was, however, dismissed: Crowley was deemed unfit on the suspicion of “sex intemperance”. Stunned by the decision, Crowley headed to Paris, where Mathers was now residing. Mathers, who had been in conflict with the adepts in London for a while, personally initiated Crowley to the grade they had denied him. Crowley was thereby made part of political intrigues that were about to lead the order into a schism – on Mathers’ command, he went to London in the early winter of 1900 in an attempt to win the rebelling London group back into. The plot failed badly, however: as a result, the rebels declared Crowley’s Second Order initiation void, expelled Mathers from the Golden Dawn, and resumed business independently. A series of other conflicts soon ensued, and the order finally dissolved in 1903.

Leaving a disintegrating Golden Dawn behind, Crowley made use of his inheritance to leave Britain and travel the world, visiting places such as Mexico, Japan, Ceylon, India, Burma, and Egypt. He claimed to study Sufism and Arabic with an unnamed sheik in Cairo; in Ceylon, he visited Bennett, who had now moved to a better climate for health reasons, but also set himself up as a yogi in the tradition of Theravada

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48 Kaczyński, *Perdurabo*, 60-61; cf. Asprem, ‘The Golden Dawn and the O.T.O.’. The knowledge lectures were published by Israel Regardie in the 1930s, and are available in volume 1 of his *Golden Dawn*.

49 Not much work has been done on Bennett, but see John L. Crow, *The White Knight in the Yellow Robe*.

50 Kaczyński, *Perdurabo*, 63-64.

51 Ibid., 70-71.

Buddhism. The most significant event of these years of travel and adventure was, however, the “reception” in 1904 of Liber Legis, or The Book of the Law, while honeymooning in Cairo with his first wife, Rose Edith Crowley (née Kelly). This text would become the foundation document of Crowley’s new religion, Thelema, proclaiming a new “dispensation”, as it were, in the form of a new law for humanity in a new “aeon”.

The details of this reception have been described thoroughly elsewhere, and need not concern us here. Through a series of procedures involving the Egyptian god Horus allegedly speaking through Crowley’s wife, Rose, and a mysterious entity by the name of Aiwass dictating The Book of the Law to Crowley in three consecutive days, the spring equinox of 1904 was revealed to be “the Equinox of the Gods”, the moment in time where the previous “aeon” was to be replaced by a new one. More specifically, Osiris’ 2,000 years old reign came to an end at the arrival of Horus’ aeon, the aeon of “the Child”. In Crowley’s own interpretation of the event, he was now to establish contact with the “Secret Chiefs”, the discarnate intelligences who were secretly ruling the Golden Dawn beyond its terrestrial leadership. Despite their previous brief alliance, Crowley had fallen out with Mathers, who retained his claim to leadership of the Order in Paris. Conveniently, higher powers were now calling upon Crowley to device new magical formulae and rituals suited for the New Aeon, and device plans to destroy the old order once and for all. “Receiving” the three chapters of The Book of the Law between April 8 and April 10, Crowley became the prophet of the New Aeon of Horus, and the founder of a new religious movement, Thelema.

Crowley’s vision of Thelema as a complete religious and magical philosophy took shape and solidified only several years after the unusual events in Cairo in the spring of 1904. Eventually, however, a whole system would emerge in which magic played a central role, as a form of religious practice, and as a way to achieve higher knowledge. Crowley’s Thelemic transformation of magic involved two other aspects as well: magic was to be brought into harmony with a strictly scientific methodology, and its practices

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53 Sutin, Do What Thou Wilt, 80-117.
54 See e.g. ibid., 117-147. For Crowley’s own account and interpretations of the event, see Crowley, Confessions, 382-400; Crowley et al., Magick, 403-444.
55 Sutin, Do What Thou Wilt., 121.
were to be disseminated to the people. In addition, the Thelemic principles were to be used for a complete transformation of society and the state.\textsuperscript{56}

What were the basic tenets of Thelema? The name is Greek for “will”, and Thelema was first of all construed as a religion of radical individualism. Its famous dictum, found in the \textit{Book of the Law}, is ‘Do What Thou Wilt’, but one should be quick to point out that this was not meant as a license for hedonism. Rather, Crowley’s commentaries emphasised that the law implied the strictest possible discipline, since Thelemites are bound to discover their single “True Will”, and follow this unconditionally.\textsuperscript{57} The True Will is said to transcend the subject’s ordinary limitations for knowledge and self-knowledge, and magic is invoked as a tool for reaching this absolute knowledge of self. The magical procedure that leads to knowledge of the True Will is variously referred to in alchemical terms as “the Great Work”, or in a more mystical vein as the attainment of the “knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel”. Although various procedures were held possible, Crowley’s preferred one was based on the Abramelin grimoire from which the term Holy Guardian Angel was taken.\textsuperscript{58}

Attainment of the knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel, Crowley wrote,

\begin{quote}
\hspace*{1cm}is the essential Work of every man; none other ranks with it either for personal progress or for power to help one's fellows. This unachieved, man is no more than the unhappiest and blindest of animals. He is conscious of his own incomprehensible calamity, and clumsily incapable of repairing it. Achieved, he is no less than the co-heir of Gods, a Lord of Light. He is conscious of his own consecrated course, and confidently ready to run it.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Crowley's take on magic clearly springs out of his Golden Dawn training, which also had a focus on attaining higher knowledge and personal transformation. With Thelema, however, this quest becomes a religion in its own right, complete with a new ethics and freed from a traditional Christian framework.

\textsuperscript{56} See especially Crowley, 'The Scientific Solution of the Problem of Government'.
\textsuperscript{57} E.g. Crowley, 'Liber II'.
\textsuperscript{58} See Mathers, ed., \textit{The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage}.\textsuperscript{59} Crowley, \textit{Magick}, 494.
Institutionally, Crowley’s new synthesis was embedded in two different structures. In 1907 he founded his own magical order together with George Cecil Jones, the A.:A.: (Astron Argon), designed to take over the mandate of the Golden Dawn. The order went public in 1909 with the first edition of a new occult periodical, *The Equinox*. The programme that was launched by the new order and its journal was entitled “Scientific Illuminism”. Its motto was ‘the Method of Science – the Aim of Religion’, reflecting Crowley’s insistence that magic had to be revised in order to conform to the standards of science rather than the “superstition” of earlier aeons. The articles, essays, and rituals that were subsequently published in *The Equinox* attempted to set magic on a scientific footing, giving examples of how procedures could be modified to accommodate scientific methods. In these publications and in other material related to it, a curious project takes shape, attempting to bring the quest for higher knowledge under the controlling strictures of reason. We shall have more to say about this later.

In the years leading up to the Great War, Crowley launched a campaign to spread Thelema to all branches of society, hoping to establish it also as a political force. For this goal, a secretive magical society such as the A.:A.: was not sufficient. Instead, Crowley availed himself of his newly acquired leading position in the German Neo-Templar group, Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). The early history of this order is complicated and contested, but it is connected with the many Masonic activities of the German occultist, political activist and journalist Theodor Reuss (1855–1923). Here we should briefly mention that Reuss, who came to know Crowley and appointed him to lead the O.T.O.’s activities in Great Britain in 1912, was also one of Rudolf Steiner’s contacts in the Berlin occult scene. In fact, some rumours of Steiner being a member of the O.T.O. have their origin in this friendship. Steiner, who during the first decade of the 20th century took a deep interest in Masonic traditions, did run a lodge going by the name *Mysteria Maxima Aeterna*, which seems to have been based on charters given to him by

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61 For a concise overview of these events, see Asprem, ‘The Golden Dawn and the O.T.O.’; cf. Pasi, ‘Ordo Templi Orientis’.

62 For a recent study of this murky history, see Kaczynski, *Forgotten Templars*.

63 See e.g. Daniel van Egmond, ‘Western Esoteric Schools in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, 337-340.
Reuss – possibly for the ‘Order of Oriental Templars’ that Reuss had mentioned in his journal, *Oriflamme*, in 1906. 64 It would at any rate be strongly misleading to characterise Steiner as an O.T.O. member, indicating by that a link between Steiner and Crowley. There was no overarching organisational structure for such an order in existence until Crowley was appointed by Reuss to revise the rituals, and build up a workable organisation. 65 This task was carried out by Crowley between 1910 and 1912. In this period Crowley rewrote the O.T.O.’s rituals and doctrine, streamlining the system of initiation, and making the order fully operable for practical work. However, Crowley also seized this opportunity to thoroughly “Thelemise” the order, making it into a practically oriented vessel for spreading his radical social and religious vision. In 1923, Crowley succeeded Reuss as international leader of the O.T.O. Emphasis was soon put on the order’s role in promulgating the “Law of Thelema”, and in working as a political avant-garde for the new Thelemic world order. 66 The campaign failed badly, however, and Crowley left a largely dysfunctional and splintered order when he died in 1947. 67

2 COMPARATIVE GNOSIS:

**Geheimwissenschaft versus Scientific Illuminism**

The biographical sketches of Steiner and Crowley above portray two men coming out of different social, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds, getting involved with different strands of modern esoteric thought at different stages in their lives. They shared a rebellious attitude, however, and eventually both became reformers of the esoteric “schools” they had entered into. In this section we shall have a closer look at what these two occultist reformers had to say about higher knowledge, amounting to a comparison of two esoteric epistemologies. I will start by introducing Steiner’s perspective, before moving on to Crowley’s. For each author, I begin by clarifying the selection of sources, placing them in context of the biographies that have been drawn up above. Following

65 Cf. Pasi, ‘Ordo Templi Orientis’.
66 The essence of Crowley’s views on the Order in this respect was published already in 1919, in the so-called “Blue Equinox”, being the first issue of the third volume of *The Equinox*.
67 The best studies of the O.T.O.’s institutional legacy – a largely under-researched field – are Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God*; idem, ‘Chaos from Order’.
this, three points will be considered: First, I will look at the goal or broader function attributed to higher knowledge; secondly, the ontologies or worldviews that makes higher knowledge possible for each author; finally, I approach the specific epistemological questions that concern how knowledge can be obtained, how its status is secured, and how it is managed in practice. While the sections are arranged to introduce these three points in the order mentioned, there is significant interdependence between the themes. This means that in the final sections on epistemology, we will in practice see the complete relation between soteriological, ontological and epistemological aspects of each author’s system.

“OCCULT SCIENCE”: STEINER’S DEVOTIONAL ROAD TO HIGHER KNOWLEDGE

Steiner’s perspective on higher knowledge is primarily laid out in the para-Theosophical works published for the first time in the journal Lucifer-Gnosis between 1904 and 1908. Foremost among these is the series of articles that would eventually become the book *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse die Höheren Welten*. This book is the most focused work of “esoteric epistemology” we find in Steiner’s oeuvre. A brief note on the work’s history is, however, in order, since it went through several incarnations before reaching its current canonised form. It first appeared as essays in the early years of *Lucifer-Gnosis*, from 1904 to 1905 (issues 13-28), before it was published in two separate book volumes in the period 1908-1909. These books were immediately translated into English as *The Way of Initiation: How to Attain Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* (1908), and *Initiation and Its Results* (1909). The definite edition of the work was published only in 1914, just as war was breaking out in Europe and after Steiner had broken away from Theosophy and established the Anthroposophical Society. An appendix was added to a later 1918 edition. I have deemed it best to give priority to the later, revised versions, as we are interested above all in Steiner’s own project rather than in the slow procedure through which he was distancing himself from Theosophy. Nevertheless, I will also make some use of his older work to illustrate specific points, particularly the book on Theosophy, which in fact has much overlap with *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse*. References to Aus

der Akasha-Chronik (which first appeared in Lucifer-Gnosis between 1904 and 1908, and only published as a book posthumously, in 1939), and Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss (first edition 1909) will also be brought in, to illustrate aspects of Steiner’s worldview and to provide concrete examples of higher knowledge claims.

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In esoteric discourses, higher knowledge has typically been connected with soteriological projects. Steiner is no exception: gaining “supersensible knowledge” is, for him, intimately connected with the attainment of freedom. As we saw in the biographical section, an emphasis on the tension between individual freedom and natural law was a central philosophical problem that Steiner had been grappling with in his 1882 PhD dissertation, Wahrheit und Wissenschaft, and in the key philosophical work that followed it, Die Philosophie der Freiheit (1894). The problem was largely derived from the German idealist tradition, and Steiner had tried to solve it through an engagement with the works of Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. After discovering occultism, however, Steiner began exploring new avenues for solving the problem of freedom, knowledge, and natural law. In his book on Theosophy, for example, Steiner teaches that higher perceptions help the individual to free him-/herself from “external” appearances, pressures, and constraints, by cultivating a focus on one’s “imperishable” and “eternal” inner “I”. Esoteric knowledge of the self becomes the road to total freedom, because ‘freedom is action from out of one’s inner being. And only he may act from out of his inner being who draws his motives from the Eternal’. Connected to this is an essentially Platonic moral theory, for Steiner continues to stress that supersensible vision makes it possible to see eternal “laws” of right conduct, compared explicitly to the laws of mathematics. When one is able to distinguish the eternal and true laws from arbitrary passions and urges arising in one’s body with relation to external things, then the initiate can truly choose to follow higher principles. Following such higher principles is the only true freedom.

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70 For an overview of the philosophical problem of freedom in the context of German idealism, see especially Beiser, German Idealism, 273-306.
71 Steiner, Theosophy, 217.
72 Ibid., 221.
73 Ibid., 212-222.
Steiner’s view of higher knowledge is based on a worldview heavily influenced by Theosophy. A partition of the world into material, etheric, and astral is especially important in this regard. Steiner wrote on the subject in *Theosophy*, and the ontological and anthropological parts of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* are essentially borrowed from this earlier booklet. We have already encountered the essentials of this ontology in our discussion of the ether metaphysics of Oliver Lodge and in the worldviews of Besant and Leadbeater in previous chapters. The two latter figures were no doubt profound influences on Steiner, and his ideas clearly belong to the same Theosophical family. According to this ontology, the immediate material world is coextensive with a finer reality of ether, and an even subtler astral plane. Beyond this levelled reality there is a higher, spiritual world. The different layers of reality are used to explain various aspects of nature as we generally know it. As in Theosophy, Steiner connects the ether with animating life forces, typical of plants and all higher organisms, while the astral plane is a plane of pure emotion, memory, and intellect. Plants thus possess ether bodies, which mediate the life forces and enable them to grow and reproduce, while animals and humans possess astral bodies in addition, which are the prerequisite for the cognitive functions that mankind has in common with the animals. On top of these bodies, human beings have yet another body, which Steiner calls the “higher I” (‘höhere Ich’). This is identified as the essential and imperishable soul, which makes it possible for humans to be fully and consciously active in the higher worlds.

As seen in Theosophy, and in Lodge’s theories of extrasensory perception, it is through these subtle bodies that man has a potential of achieving higher knowledge. Gaining such knowledge is therefore first of all a question of integration and awakening of the subtler bodies: one first has to become aware of one’s higher bodies, and then develop and connect them to the normal functions of the physical body. It should be stressed that these parallel bodies are seen to exist on a continuum – there is no strict or absolute separation between the material, the astral, and the etheric, as the one flows into the other. In a chapter entitled ‘The Physical World and Its Connection with the

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74 See especially *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse*, 80-110; cf. idem, *Theosophy*.

75 See e.g. my discussion of the cognitive dimensions of Theosophy’s anthropology in Asprem, ‘Pondering Imponderables’, 155-159.
Soul and Spirit-Lands', Steiner dwells on these ontological connections at some length.76 One analogy used to illustrate the connection between the worlds is provided by considering the relation between ice and water:

Even as a piece of ice floating on the water is of the same matter as the surrounding water but stands out from it owing to particular qualities, so are the things of the senses matter of the surrounding soul and spirit worlds; and they stand out from these owing to particular qualities which make them perceptible to the senses. They are, to speak half metaphorically, condensed spirit and soul formations; and the condensation makes it possible for the senses to acquire knowledge of them. In fact, as ice is only a form in which the water exists, so are the objects of the senses only a form in which soul and spirit beings exist. If one has grasped this, one can also understand that as water can pass over into ice, so the spirit world can pass over into the soul world, and the latter into that of the senses.77

There are real differences between the actual formation of spiritual and material things, but they are not different in essence. The separation between spiritual and material realities is an epistemological obstacle rather than a real ontological difference. Our ordinary senses are attuned to perceive only one type of forms and qualities (e.g. “ice” in the water), but in principle the subtler forms can also be known. The last part of the quote shows how this separation, not being ontologically relevant, departs from the strict “two-world” separation of someone like Swedenborg. In fact, the intimate connection between the worlds is used by Steiner to explain specific features of the material world. The difference between minerals, plants, animals, and human beings, for example, is understood in terms of different degrees of interaction with these higher realms.78

There is, in short, an ontological continuity between the different “worlds”, and this continuity makes higher forms of knowledge possible. The connection between the levels of reality is also crucial for explaining the inherent soteriological system: the higher autonomy and freedom Steiner promises his students is achievable through a process in which the higher bodies take control of the lower ones – ultimately, the inner “I” should be emperor, making the lower bodies its vehicle, and thereby effecting

76 Steiner, Theosophy, 161-177.
77 Ibid., 162-163. Emphasis added.
78 Ibid., 164-173.
changes in the material world. Steiner writes how the channelling of higher knowledge to and through the material body is achieved through the heart, or more specifically the etheric and astral organs of perception associated with it:

... all higher spiritual realities must be related to the physical world, and man himself must act as a channel through which they flow into it. It is precisely through the heart organ that the higher ego governs the physical self, making it into its instrument.79

Accessing and developing the higher “sense organs” on the etheric and astral level is not only a matter of full integration of the human being on all ontological levels. Activating these higher organs also opens up to wholly different worlds, making truly “suprasensible knowledge” possible.80 The astral plane exists as an independent world, with its own laws and inhabitants, and thus lies there as an unexplored continent, ready to be discovered by the trained “Geheimwissenschaftler”. To take only one example, it is on the astral plane that the “akashic records” are stored – the astral memory of everything that has ever lived, and all that has ever happened. Reading in these astral records the initiate could gain knowledge of previous incarnations, and learn about life in long lost civilisations. The concept of the akashic records was developed in this specific form in Leadbeater’s Clairvoyance (1899), which was a huge influence on Steiner. Steiner’s own astral explorations are detailed in Aus der Akasha-Chronik, which includes minute details of life on Atlantis and Lemuria, descriptions of their technological aptitude, and accounts of the esoteric evolution of humanity and its various races.81

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The ontology sketched above already shows how the constitution of the human body/bodies stands in a relation to higher spheres that makes exalted forms of

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79 Steiner, Knowledge of the Higher Worlds, 196; cf. the German version, Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse, 114-115.
80 Steiner’s view, including the role of the heart as an organ for supersensible knowledge, may easily be compared with views prominent in German romantic Mesmerism. Cf. Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 262-265. See also my discussion of the probable influence of romantic Mesmerism on Blavatsky, Besant, and Leadbeater in the previous chapter.
81 Steiner, Aus der Akasha-Chronik.
knowledge possible. In the appendix added to the 1918 edition of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, Steiner attempted to clarify and defend his path to supersensible knowledge by separating it strictly from the “superstitions” of spiritualists, clairvoyant dreamers, and other ‘degenerate practices’.\(^{82}\) This was no doubt a strategic manoeuvre to distance his teachings from competitors, and to portray himself as more rational, more scientific, and more forward-looking than the rest of the esoteric milieu – a strategy that nearly everyone else was using as well.\(^{83}\) Nevertheless, there is something to be said in defence of the distinction in Steiner’s case, for his view of higher knowledge is clothed in a language that often comes close to that of academic philosophy, and the perspectives taken are more clearly related to philosophical questions that were seriously debated in academic contexts. We have to note Steiner’s philosophical background in German idealism, and particularly the reaction to Kant’s critical philosophy. To be sure, the answers Steiner eventually found to the philosophical questions of the times were far outside of what mainstream philosophers could ever agree with, but the fact that the problems were similar should not be taken lightly. Significantly, these are problems that haunted post-Kantian philosophy at large: they concern the difficulties of epistemology as conceived after the “Copernican revolution” of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. What are the limits of human inquiry? Where does observation end, and pure metaphysical speculation begin? How legitimate are such speculations? How do we distinguish the pure forms of things from human constructs and projections? On what basis can a legitimate system of morality be built?

All these questions are, as we have seen, implicit in the problem of disenchantment. Steiner’s vehemently anti-Kantian answers, informed by a Theosophical ontology, constitute a strong opposition to “enchant” positions. In its *theoretical* aspect, Steiner’s view of higher knowledge states that it is possible to perceive the *noumenal* things-in-themselves, as they really and truly are. This view goes back to Steiner’s understanding of Goethe.\(^{84}\) However, we can also discern an overlap with the contemporary *phenomenological* tradition, particularly in Steiner’s continued emphasis on suspending judgment and withdrawing oneself entirely from the process of perception so that the things may appear to the mind “as they truly are”. This is

\(^{82}\) Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, 260.

\(^{83}\) Cf. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*.

\(^{84}\) Steiner, *Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung*.
reminiscent of the phenomenological practice of *epoché*, and not too far removed from Edmund Husserl’s method.85 Indeed, Steiner had come to know Franz von Brentano in Vienna, who is typically seen as a founding figure of the phenomenological tradition.86

But Steiner’s esoteric epistemology also rests on a Theosophical ontology along the lines described above, and it is here that he finally diverges from philosophical positions defended within the academic mainstream. For example, knowledge of the things in themselves is possible to attain, contra Kant, because the physical “things” are merely gross manifestations of objects that exist in purer form in the finer substances of the astral realm. The “phenomenal” appearance of an object is a “condensation of spirit”, the “noumenal” object viewed from the angle of the physical senses. Luckily, however, man has other bodies with other senses, which are capable of perceiving “spirit” directly. The essence of things can be grasped directly with thought: ‘when man forms thought about things he merely looks up from the sensible form to the spiritual Archetypes of the things’.87 Thinking of a thing is actually perceiving it in a higher world. By undergoing a certain practical, occult training programme (more on that shortly), the initiate develops and awakens organs of perception that are just as real as the ordinary senses, but lie hidden from physical view. With these organs, it is possible to gain proper knowledge about things-in-themselves. Steiner saw this as a route to gain true knowledge not only about facts, but also the *value* of things in nature. In other words, we are dealing with a kind of knowledge that defies the “intellectual sacrifice”: it teaches not only what things look like or how they behave, but also what they are in and of themselves (metaphysics), and how the individual ought to behave towards them (axiology). It is not quite *scientific* knowledge in the usual sense, but Steiner did see it as a form of secure knowledge nevertheless, established by definite methods, and objective in character. Two students of the occult (‘Geheimschüler’), on the same level of development, would always see the same astral ‘lines and figures’ when determining the true nature of a plant or an animal, or the mental state of a human being.88

How could such knowledge be achieved in practice? This is the subject of *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse die Höheren Welten*, where Steiner describes the training of

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85 See e.g. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (1931).
87 Steiner, *Theosophy*, 164.
the occult student from the most mundane and simple exercises, through gradually more complex meditations, to the attainment of full-blown visions and interaction with higher beings in the suprasensible worlds. Throughout this training there is a strong emphasis on disciplining the student’s attitude towards knowledge and various traits of character. Steiner emphasises what he calls ‘the path of worship’ (‘Pfad der Verehrung’). The right attitude for occult students is one of devotion and awe towards authorities. Persons who have been brought up to respect authorities and not ask critical questions have a clear advantage on the path to occult knowledge, Steiner writes. While this may sound like a call for subjugation and authoritarianism, he is quick to assure his readers that the attitude is not a path to ‘slavery’. Instead, ‘the first childlike reverence for humans later becomes a reverence for truth and knowledge’. The student of the occult is no longer a child, but yet, an attitude of reverence and veneration is required towards his or her teacher, and, truth be told, to anyone who is considered to have a “genuine” claim to esoteric insights. Steiner illustrates the attitude in Theosophy, where he recreates a hypothetical exchange between a student of the occult and his teacher:

For him who asks, “How can I gain personal knowledge of the higher truths of Theosophy?” the answer must be given, “Begin by making yourself acquainted with what is communicated by others concerning such truths.” And should he reply, “I wish to see for myself, I do not wish to know anything about what others have seen,” one must answer, “It is in the very assimilating of the communications of others that the first step toward personal knowledge consists.” And if he should answer, “Then I am forced to have blind faith to begin with,” one can only reply that in regard to something communicated it is not a case of belief or unbelief but merely of an unprejudiced consideration of what one hears. The theosophist never speaks with the intention of awakening blind faith in what he says. He merely says, “I have experienced this in the higher regions of existence, and I narrate these my experiences.”

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89 Ibid., 13. Translation of this term is difficult, and alternatives such as “reverence” and “veneration” might in some instances be preferred. The translators of Steiner’s work clearly ran into this problem: all the three mentioned terms appear in place of the German “Verehrung” in various contexts. I will be flexible in my choice of terms, but supply references to the German original when relevant.

90 Ibid.

91 ‘Es wird später die erste kindliche Verehrung gegenüber Menschen zur Verehrung gegenüber Wahrheit und Erkenntnis.’ Ibid., 14.

92 Steiner, Theosophy, 196-197.
The student is nevertheless asked to curtail his criticism: ‘Unfounded disbelief is injurious. It works in the recipient as a repelling force. It hinders him from receiving the fructifying thoughts.’ While Steiner admits that a culture of criticism has been a formidable force for Western civilisation’s technical and material development, he also singles it out as a serious spiritual ailment of the modern world:

Our civilization tends more toward critical judgment and condemnation than toward devotion and selfless veneration ['Verehrung']. Our children already criticize far more than they worship ['hingebungsvoll verehren']. But every criticism, every adverse judgment passed, disperses the powers of the soul for the attainment of higher knowledge in the same measure that all veneration and reverence ['hingebungsvolle Ehrfurcht'] develops them. In this we do not wish to say anything against our civilization. There is no question here of leveling criticism against it. To this critical faculty, this self-conscious human judgment, this “test all things and hold fast what is best,” we owe the greatness of our civilization. Man could never have attained to the science, the industry, the commerce, the rights relationships of our time, had he not applied to all things the standard of his critical judgment. But what we have thereby gained in external culture we have had to pay for with a corresponding loss of higher knowledge of spiritual life.

Criticism is held up against reverence, mirroring the distinction between the “material” and the “spiritual”. While criticism has been beneficial to the growth of science, industry, and commerce, an attitude of reverence facilitated by a suspension of critical faculties is required of the student of “occult science”. Superficially, this may indeed look like a variety of the intellectual sacrifice: it is by worship (faith) rather than criticism (reason) that knowledge of higher worlds can be achieved. The difference, however, is that also the path of worship can be a “science”, and the “truths” acquired by it demand to be counted as knowledge in every way as secure as the knowledge of external facts. At present we should carefully note this ambiguity, before returning to it in the final discussion.

93 Ibid., 199.
94 Steiner, Knowledge of the Higher Worlds, 8-9. Compare German original in Steiner, Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse, 15.
Reverence, according to Steiner, is not simply an attitude one must take towards one’s teacher. More importantly, it must be internalised and applied to the content of one’s own mind when treading the path of initiation. As Steiner put it, ‘one of the first qualities which everyone wishing to arrive at a personal vision of higher facts has to develop ... is the UNRESERVED, UNPREJUDICED, LAYING OF ONESELF OPEN to that which is revealed by human beings or the world external to man’.\footnote{Ibid., Theosophy, 200. Capitalisation in original.} The attitude should be practiced in the student’s daily life, with the aim of rooting out any prejudice or judgement that could possibly limit one’s experience. An illustrative expression of what this means for the control and discipline of one’s attitudes to the world is the somewhat stoic call for “equanimity”: ‘A man who loses himself in the pleasure or pain caused by each varying impression cannot tread the path of higher knowledge. He must accept pleasure and pain with EQUANIMITY’.\footnote{Ibid., 206. Capitalisation in original.} Pleasure and pain are merely subjective, situated, and personal ways of experiencing things and events in the world, and they therefore bar the road to genuine knowledge of things as they truly are. Training is needed to unlearn such subjective and relative emotivism:

if one is in an environment that excites this or that judgement, one should suppress the judgment and, free from criticism, lay oneself open to impressions. One should allow things and events to speak TO ONESELF rather than speak oneself about them. And one should extend this even to one’s thought-world. One should suppress in ONESELF that which prompts this or that thought and allow only what is outside to produce the thoughts. Only when such exercises are carried out with holiest earnestness and perseverance, do they lead to the goal of higher knowledge.\footnote{Ibid., 202-203. Capitalisation in original.}

Failing at this, one will end up seeing oneself in the things, rather than the things in themselves: ‘By obeying inclination we thrust ourselves, as it were, through the environment instead of laying ourselves open to it and feeling its true worth’.\footnote{Ibid., 205.} The goal is nothing short of a genuine empathy with objects.

When the student has succeeded in creating a fundamental devotion to pure knowledge, suppressing one’s personal judgments and emotional responses, the next
step for the aspirant is to establish and cultivate a state of inner calm. One should make room for a few moments of “meditation” every day, where one sees the events of the day from “without”. In these calm moments, the aspirant should also learn to distinguish the “essential” from the “inessential”, and to see one’s own responses from an objective point of view. Such exercises will lead to the awakening of one’s “higher man” or “inner master”, Steiner assures, and result in a state of freedom from outer disturbances and emotional whims. But the establishment of moments of inner calm also opens the way to knowledge of the higher worlds in a stricter sense. In states of “meditation”, conducted on the principles mentioned (i.e. suspension of judgment, calm dispassionate perception), the aspirant will start to experience that his thoughts are in fact alive; they are not merely his own productions, but reflect higher realities independent of his mind. In this state the student will eventually come to know that there are other, higher “thought-beings” out there, which can be communicated with.

The road to full supersensible knowledge, then, has three steps: preparation, enlightenment, and initiation. The preparatory stage consists of various exercises aimed at transforming “outer” senses, such as seeing and hearing, to “inner” senses for perceiving the higher worlds. An example is the contemplation of certain processes in nature, such as a plant’s growth, flowering, deflowering, death and decay. “Astral” patterns will start to emerge when looking at these natural phenomena with the prescribed attitude, and eventually direct perception of the “astral plane” will develop. These are portrayed not as subjective projections, but as real, true, and eternal forms: two students on the same level of development will see the exact same patterns.

Having been properly prepared by adopting the right mental attitude, the next phase is enlightenment. Enlightenment is understood as the ability to see clearly in the astral worlds. The student would, for example, learn how to perceive the essential differences between classes of things – again Steiner uses a crystal, a plant, and an animal as his examples. These instill different feelings in the soul, and the aspirant who

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100 Ibid., 24-25.
101 Ibid., 26.
102 Ibid., 29-51.
103 Ibid., 31-32.
works systematically to recognise such differences astrally when encountering objects, will slowly start to develop the perceptual organs for clairvoyance (‘Hellseherorgane’). Steiner is quite literal about this: real changes occur in the constitution of the student’s subtle bodies. Occult training stimulates the growth of the *chakras* or “lotus flowers” that are located in the astral body, and which are connected to various occult powers. The nature, function, and location of these organs of occult perception are entirely in line with those described by Leadbeater and Besant.

The final goal of all this training is to attain initiation. When complete lucidity has been achieved, the student is presented with a number of “tests” conducted solely on the higher planes. There are trials by fire, water, and air, representing the different subtle bodies and the personality traits associated with them; finally, he can enter into the ‘temple of higher wisdom’, where he will receive the ‘draught of forgetfulness’ and the ‘draught of remembrance’. Behind this veiled terminology a picture of initiation emerges in which the student is finally able to leave the physical world behind, while the higher, supersensible worlds are opened up to him. He will now be able to communicate with higher beings, discarnate from material reality. He will attain a universal “remembrance” of everything about his own previous incarnations, and knowledge of all the secret, spiritual forces that have been working on his many lives. He will also be able to perceive the specific destinies of the different nations and races of the world, their particular guiding spirits, and other subtle forces working on them on the material plane. As the student has now moved progressively further away from the ordinary material world, Steiner warns that the biggest threat is succumbing to fantasy and illusions; individuals who are dreamers, fantasy-prone, or superstitious are the least suited for occult study, together with those who lack the required discipline and determination.

This last stage is connected with a very specific encounter in the higher realms: the meeting with the ‘Guardian of the Threshold’ (‘Hüter der Schwelle’). The term is lifted from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s Rosicrucian novel, *Zanoni*, as Steiner himself acknowledges. Bulwer-Lytton had described how magical evocations could call the

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104 Ibid., 37.
105 Ibid, 80-110.
106 Ibid., 61-62.
107 Ibid., 58.
guardian to visible appearance, but Steiner ensures his students that such magical procedures are no longer necessary:

It is a lower magical process to make the Guardian of the Threshold physically visible also. That was attained by producing a cloud of fine substance, a kind of frankincense resulting from a particular mixture of a number of substances. The developed power of the magician is then able to mould the frankincense into shape, animating it ... Such physical phenomena are no longer necessary for those sufficiently prepared for the higher sight...  

According to Steiner, there are in fact two of these creatures, a “lesser” and a “greater guardian”, encountered by the initiate more or less at the same time. The lesser guardian appears to the initiate when the various subtle bodies (astral, etheric, “higher I”) have been so highly developed that they start to separate from each other – a process that is connected with certain grave psychological dangers. The greater guardian then appears when the subtle bodies are collectively severed from the physical body, now becoming free to roam the higher worlds unhindered. These two entities are described as having a more or less independent existence in the higher realms: ‘What is here indicated ... must not be understood in the sense of an allegory, but as an experience of the highest possible reality befalling the esoteric student’.  

The “lesser guardian” is not completely independent of the individual, however, for it has itself been created by the individual’s good and bad actions as they have accumulated through countless incarnations. It is this lesser guardian that governs the person’s reincarnations, and so to speak enforces the laws of karma. The lesser guardian will generally appear terrible due to the accumulation of bad behaviour through countless incarnations. If the initiate can handle this meeting with the guardian, and pass beyond it, he achieves lucid, disembodied immortality:

If successful, this meeting with the Guardian results in the student's next physical death being an entirely different event from death as he knew it formerly. He experiences death consciously by laying aside the physical body as one discards a garment that is worn out or perhaps rendered useless through a sudden rent. Thus his physical death is of special

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108 Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, 237-238
importance only for those living with him, whose perception is still restricted to the world of
the senses. For them the student dies; but for himself nothing of importance is changed in his
whole environment. The entire supersensible world stood open to him before his death, and
it is this same world that now confronts him after death.\footnote{Ibid., 239.}

Overcoming the lesser guardian means to take full conscious control of one’s
reincarnation cycle, rising above the laws of karma. From this new vantage point, the
initiate also gains knowledge about the way in which various “racial” and “national”
spirits have been directing him previously. They will not push him anymore; instead it
becomes the initiate’s responsibility to ‘not only know his own tasks, but ... knowingly
collaborate in those of his folk, his race’\footnote{Ibid., 241.}. Put bluntly: since the higher spirits will not
take care of one’s racial will anymore, the initiate must become a fully self-conscious
and dedicated racist.\footnote{In the sense of dedicating one’s actions to manifesting the collective will of one’s own race and nation. While the above statement may appear condemning, it is no secret that Steiner’s teachings were strongly racist, and became increasingly so during and after the Great War. See e.g. Zander, \textit{Rudolf Steiner}, 68-76, 184-186; Peter Staudenmaier, ‘Antroposofi og øko-fascisme’ (re-published online in English translation as ’Anthroposophy and Ecofascism’). As Staudenmaier has noted, English-speaking readers have had less opportunity to look at the racist elements of Steiner’s work, since later translations published by the Anthroposophical Society have tended to omit passages and sometimes entire chapters that would appear problematic to a contemporary reader. For Steiner’s complex and shifting attitudes towards Jews and anti-Semitism, see Staudenmaier, ‘Rudolf Steiner and the Jewish Question’. See also Staudenmaier’s dissertation on the complex relations between anthroposophy and fascism in Germany and Italy: \textit{Between Occultism and Fascism}.}{\footnote{Steiner, \textit{Knowledge of the Higher Worlds}, 253.}}

The \textit{second} Guardian of the Threshold is encountered when the initiate has
already taken the first steps into the supersensible worlds. Contrary to the terrible and
frightening first Guardian, the second appears as ‘a sublime luminous being whose
beauty is difficult to describe in the words of human language’.\footnote{Steiner, \textit{Knowledge of the Higher Worlds}, 253.} While the lesser
guardian represented the accumulated imperfections of the past, the greater represents
the perfections of the future. It guards the path to the higher regions of the
supersensible worlds, warning the initiate against going any further before he has used
all of his newly won powers to help others in the physical world to achieve what he
gained for himself. The promise held out for the future is complete union with the second Guardian, but this will only be granted if the initiate first applies himself in every possible way to facilitate the liberation of his fellow humans. It is the initiate's prerogative to ignore the Guardian's plea, and continue with a disembodied existence in the higher realms. However, Steiner warns that by doing this, no union will ever be achieved. Remaining in the supersensible worlds is to follow the "black path", and the initiate who chooses it will only experience spiritual stagnation. Those who follow the "white path" and return to earthly existence to help others will take part in future spiritual evolution, and eventually merge with the perfect being of the greater Guardian.115 This, then, is the final and ultimate moral choice, awaiting the student of higher knowledge at the end of the road to initiation.

**Scientific Illuminism: Crowley's Skeptical Road to Higher Knowledge**

Crowley’s “Scientific Illuminism” was embedded in the magical order he founded with George Cecil Jones in 1907, the A∴A∴. The main sources for it are found in the journal *The Equinox*, particularly the first volume published in 1909. The editorials, articles, essays, exercises and rituals published there will form the basis of our analysis. However, they must be supplemented by various other texts Crowley produced in order to demonstrate both context and development. Of particular importance are Crowley's key texts on magic and mysticism, collectively known as Liber ABA (or Book Four), the concise and influential *Magick in Theory and Practice*, and his autobiography, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*.116 Crowley's writings on magical practice are extensive, so a careful selection is necessary. I will focus primarily on material that deal with the


116 *Book Four* started as the result of a magical working that took place in 1911 in Switzerland, and was first published in two sections: the first appearing in 1911, the second in 1912. A third part was also begun at that point, bearing the title *Magick in Theory and Practice*. However, completion and publication of this third part was cut short by the First World War and Crowley's departure for America in 1914. It was only finished in 1921, at Crowley's Thelemic “abbey” near Cefalù, Sicily. In the following I will refer to the single-volume edition of all three parts edited by William Breeze and published in 1997: Crowley, Mary Desti, and Leila Waddell, *Magick: Book Four*. 
“methodological” aspects of his Scientific Illuminism so that a proper comparison with
Steiner’s system for obtaining higher knowledge can be made.117

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The quest for higher knowledge in Crowley’s work is intimately connected with magic,
and his new religion, Thelema. As in the case of Steiner, the ultimate goal of achieving
higher knowledge is freedom – in Crowley’s case, the freedom to follow one’s “True
Will”.118 In the biographical section we saw that knowledge of the True Will could be
achieved through various magical procedures, and that the attainment was described as
the “Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel”. Crowley would change
his opinion on the exact nature of this mysterious entity over the years, but it was
always clear that the Holy Guardian Angel could impart superior and deeply personal
knowledge to the magician concerning his or her destiny and purpose in life –
knowledge, furthermore, which went beyond what the individual could possibly know
on its own. Without this knowledge, the magician has no direction; he cannot follow the
Thelema’s one and only law – ‘do what thou wilt’ – because he does not know the nature
of his will. For this reason, all magic performed before knowledge of the Holy Guardian
Angel and the True Will has been attained, should be directed towards reaching this
knowledge in the future. For example, the magician might want to perform the
Abramelin operation, which Crowley considered to be particularly effective, but to do so
properly, he will need a ritual space and expensive equipment. Thus, lesser magical
operations focused on obtaining the material resources necessary for performing the
Abramelin operation will be considered legitimate. Straying away from the pursuit of
knowledge of the True Will, seeking to satisfy random whims or pleasures instead,
Crowley defined as “black magic”.119

117 This means that other aspects are omitted or treated with relative brevity. I will, for example, not go
into any detail about the different types of magical practice that were used and synthesised by Crowely,
spanning medieval and early-modern grimoires, “Enochian” angel magic, and, importantly, sexual magic.
For Crowley’s sex magic, see e.g. Hugh Urban, Magia Sexualis, 109-139; for his work with the Enochian
system, see Asprem, Arguing with Angels, 85-102.
118 I have previously discussed Thelema as an ethical system in Asprem, ‘Én Vilje, hinsides godt og ondt’.
The function of magical practice as a “way of life” in this ethical system was explored in Asprem, ‘Thelema
og ritualmagi’.
119 See e.g. Crowley et al., Magick, 275.
Higher knowledge is thus necessary for achieving the goal of self-realisation in Thelema as it was in Steiner's system. This knowledge is obtained through the practice of magic. One must first train one's ability to do magic and move about in the higher worlds; when sufficiently advanced, one may invoke the Holy Guardian Angel and achieve higher knowledge of one's purpose in life. Scientific Illuminism, as a specific approach to doing magic, is relevant on all steps of this process. It promises to give the magician the appropriate tools for checking the knowledge achieved, guarding against delusions, and making sure that each step is in fact in the right direction.

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Crowley's ontological position was never made entirely clear, and seems to have shifted several times through his career. Generally, we might say that he moved from a strict "ontological naturalism", in which magic was reduced to the brain and religion understood within a completely materialistic framework, through a more "romantic-psychological" interpretation, in the tradition of Myers and James, to a full-blown form of occultist supernaturalism in his later years. In a sense, he moved from a "disenchanted" to an "enchanted" position. The "disenchanted" phase of materialistic ontological naturalism is best illustrated by Crowley's introductory essay to The Goetia, written in 1900. Here, Crowley presents a completely disenchanted picture of the efficacy of ritual. All phenomena associated with magical ceremonies, including the appearance of demons or angels, and the successful attainment of what is desired, is reduced to a thoroughly naturalistic understanding of psychology. After problematising the distinction between the "real" and the merely "illusory" by arguing, with Herbert Spencer, that both are 'evidence of some cause' – i.e. they are both 'phenomena dependent on brain-changes' – Crowley goes on to argue that magic gains its efficacy precisely through a willed manipulation of such lower-level brain-states. The senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch are all willfully and systematically triggered by the paraphernalia of ritual; when all these are combined and reflected upon by the mind,

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120 For an overview of Crowley's trajectory, see especially Pasi, 'Varieties of Magical Experience'.
121 Crowley, 'The Initiated Interpretation of Ceremonial Magic'.
122 See Asprem, 'Magic Naturalized?'.
123 Crowley, 'Initiated Interpretation of Ceremonial Magic', 15-16.
“magic” happens. But this magic is essentially nothing more than a physiological induction of hallucinations, and a stimulation of certain (unspecified) parts of the brain in ways that may be beneficial to the magician. Against this background, Crowley writes that the demonic creatures of the Goetia are nothing but ‘portions of the human brain’, and must not be assumed to have an independent existence as “spiritual” creatures.

Somewhat later, Crowley’s positions would switch in the direction of a less reductionistic form of psychologisation. William James’ Gifford Lectures, Varieties of Religious Experience, were published in 1902, and became a significant influence on Crowley. The book was quoted in the first volume of The Equinox, and again in Book Four. James’ Varieties even made it into the “general reading” section of the curriculum for students in the A∴A∴, appearing with the comment ‘Valuable as showing the uniformity of mystical attainment’. Crowley appears to have taken three main points from James, serving somewhat different but interconnected purposes. First, James was used as an academic authority for the view that “mystical experiences” are “valid” and meaningful, even if they are in principle reducible to, or at least dependent on, material changes in the brain. This sort of non-reductive pragmatism was implied in a lengthy quotation of James prefacing the first installation of the serialised account of Crowley’s spiritual biography, ‘The Temple of Solomon the King’. The second point Crowley took from James was the concept of religious “genius” – referring to the religious virtuosi who claim extravagant experiences, visions, mystical exaltations, and who may become the founders of new religions. Crowley saw in this concept not only a psychological theory of the rise of religions, but also a “how to”-manual for becoming a genuine prophet. Crowley’s system for attaining exalted religious insights, understood partly through the initiation system of the Golden Dawn, and partly in terms of yoga,

124 Ibid., 16-17.
125 Ibid., 17.
127 Crowley, ‘A∴A∴ Curriculum’, 21. This intriguing list was published in The Equinox volume 3, in 1919, and includes several other interesting references – such as Kant’s Prolegomena (described as ‘the best introduction to metaphysics’), Huxley’s collected Essays (described as ‘masterpieces of philosophy, as of prose’), David Hume’s essays, Herbert Spencer’s First Principles, and Thomas Paine’s The Age of Reason (described as being ‘Excellent, though elementary, as a corrective to superstition’).
128 Crowley and Fuller, ‘The Temple of Solomon the King (Book I)’, 139.
was in fact thoroughly based on his understanding of James' concept of genius. The third point Crowley referenced James for was his distinction between “once-born” and “twice-born” religions, as two distinct "psychological types" of religious systems. The first category is characterised by natural religion, a spontaneous and optimistic form of religiosity without much metaphysical depth, no developed theology, and no concept of evil. This is the religious approach of the “healthy-minded”, and James counted Walt Whitman, various liberal Christians, and followers of the mind cure movement as exemplifying this psychological type. The second type is by contrast pessimistic, has a systematic theology, metaphysics, and a project for overcoming evil. More or less all institutionalised creeds – but especially Protestantism – fall into this latter category, which exemplify the psychological type that James called the “sick soul” (or “morbid-mindedness”). Crowley adopts this distinction to distance his own new religion, Thelema, from those of the past: according to Crowley, Thelema joins the spontaneity of nature worship with the metaphysical depth of the great monotheistic religions, and thus possesses a psychological complexity which outshines that of any existing religious system. When connected, these three points taken from James provide a psychological discourse for understanding religiosity in general, particularly its experiential dimension, that remains non-reductive, pragmatic, and ontologically noncommittal. It thus promises to save the “genuineness” of religion without falling prey to supernaturalism. Under the influence of James’s Gifford Lectures, Crowley can be said to have taken one step away from a materialistic and reductionistic psychology, in the direction of what I have previously called “psychic enchantment”.

Eventually, Crowley moved away from this pragmatic position as well, and came to embrace a form of full-blown supernaturalism: the entities spoken of in grimoires and holy books – angels, demons, elementals, djinns, etc. – are real, independent beings. They are not psychological projections, “parts of the self”, or hallucinations caused by

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130 E.g. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 78-126.
131 Ibid., 127-165.
132 Crowley et al., *Magick*, 159.
133 Compare James’ first chapter on ‘Religion and Neurology’, in which he argues that the origin of the religious sentiment/feeling/experience is irrelevant for assessing its *significance*. Significance is rather to be assessed by pragmatic means: what are the *effects* of a certain belief, experience, or practice? James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1-25.
the biochemistry of the brain. As Marco Pasi has convincingly argued, Crowley in fact had to adopt this position when he took up his role as prophet of Thelema. The psychological interpretation of genius and the neurophysiological explanation of magical entities were no longer sufficient if he wanted to claim universal validity for the Thelemic revelations – particularly The Book of the Law.\textsuperscript{134} The source of his revelations had to be independent of the psyche. Even the “Higher Self” would no longer do. In his mature phase, then, there is nothing disenchanted about Crowley’s ontology. Magical creatures exist abundantly, and have constant intercourse with the natural world and with human beings. Religious authority is once again established by god-given charisma, and not merely by a psychological experience of “genius”.

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While Crowley drifts from ontological naturalism to supernaturalism, it is essential to note that a methodological naturalism remains consistently present to the very end. With reference to the naturalism-supernaturalism continuum I introduced in chapter two, Crowley never ends up in the “objectionable supernaturalism” of the theists, but stops somewhere within the range of “open-ended naturalism” (see figure 3). This is a crucial point: realism about independent spirit-beings did not mean that strict methods for verifying and testing their activity had to be scrapped. Quite to the contrary, Crowley continued to emphasise the great need of rational inquiry. This criterion was, in fact, the defining mark of Scientific Illuminism. Applying critical controls and tests to magical experience was the very meaning of The Equinox’s motto: ‘The Method of Science – the Aim of Religion’.

A positive view of scientific methodology is evident from the editorials of the first issues of The Equinox. These argue that an appeal to personal experience is insufficient for science, and call for exact measurements and quantitative studies:

\begin{quote}
We require the employment of a strictly scientific method. The mind of the seeker must be unbiased: all prejudice and other sources of error must be perceived as such and extirpated.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{134} Pasi, ‘Varieties of Magical Experience’, 154-160. This “realistic” understanding of magical entities is present in Magick in Theory and Practice, and is still stated clearly in his very last book, Magick without Tears (1943; published posthumously in 1954).
We have therefore devised a Syncretic-Eclectic Method ... to attack the Problem, through exact experiments and not by guesses.\textsuperscript{135}

But Crowley's own good words set aside, how was this “method” implemented in practice? How “scientific” was it really? In the following I will explore these questions through a closer analysis of some of the practical instructions written by Crowley, and intended as official study material for the A.:A:. Three interconnected aspects have to be explored. First of all, in the attempt to get rid of ‘charlatanism’ and ‘obscurantism’,\textsuperscript{136} Crowley designed methods to make subjective magical experiences \textit{intersubjectively available}. This was achieved above all by the use of the magical diary, which took the function of a laboratory notebook. Secondly, experience was to be replaced by experiment: magical rituals were to be conducted in such a manner that prediction of results was possible, and these results were to be tested to see if one had succeeded or failed. Third, both \textit{external} and \textit{internal} methods were devised for testing the veracity and validity of knowledge attained through encounters with magical beings. Some of these methods, as we shall see, placed Crowley close to the practices of the SPR. These methods for criticism and “quality control” of supernatural entities and the knowledge obtained from them were to be actively used during occult training. They provided the student with ways to track the progress of his training, and to check against illusions and errors.

While experience is private, experiments are public.\textsuperscript{137} The point about experiments is precisely that other experimentalists should be able to judge their validity. Procedures and results must be recorded precisely enough for others to be able to repeat and test them. For this reason, making magical experiences intersubjectively available is a necessary prerequisite of turning magical rituals into experiments. The very first practical manual of Scientific Illuminism published in \textit{The Equinox}, entitled ‘Liber Exercitorum’ (‘Book of Exercises’), illustrates this point. Its first section sets down the rules to be observed in keeping the \textit{magical record} or diary:

\textsuperscript{135} Crowley, ‘Editorial (1.2)’, 4. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{136} See e.g. Crowley, ‘Editorial (1.1)’, 2.
\textsuperscript{137} Such, at least, is the assumption underlying experimentalism. For a classic historical critique, see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, \textit{Leviathan and the Air-Pump}. 538
1. It is absolutely necessary that all experiments should be *recorded in detail* during, or immediately after, their performance.

2. It is highly important to note the physical and mental condition of the experimenter or experimenters.

3. The time and place of all experiments must be noted; also the state of the weather, and generally all conditions which might conceivably have any result upon the experiment either as *adjuvants* to or *causes* of the result, or as inhibiting it, or as *sources of error*. ...

7. The written record should be *intelligibly prepared* so that others may benefit from its study. ...

9. The more *scientific* the record is, the better.  

The emphasis is on expelling vagueness and valuating clarity. It also expresses a position that is incompatible with the appeal to personal experience that we saw in Steiner. The fact that “sources of error” have to be taken into account, and that the precise procedure of the operation or experiment must be recorded in order that it may be *replicated* and tested by others, are clear examples of this. The understanding is that immediate experiences can be wrong, and that a scientific epistemology must go beyond unverifiable claims. Clearly, we are dealing with a form of knowledge that has more in common with “reason” than with “gnosis”. The appeal to “intelligibility” in fact stems from a deep-seated recognition that both the obscurantist styles of writing and the arguments to authority that had been common in magical and occult discourse must be rooted out completely if a new scientific paradigm of magic is to be established. Illustrating what, precisely, is at stake in the difference between clarity and obscurity, Crowley gave the following examples:

‘I concentrated my mind upon a white radiant triangle in whose centre was a shining eye, for 22 minutes and 10 seconds, my attention wandering 45 times’ is a scientific and valuable statement. ‘I prayed fervently to the Lord for the space of many days’ means anything or nothing. Anybody who cares to do so may imitate my experiment and compare his result with mine. In the latter case one would always be wondering what “fervently” meant and who “the Lord” was, and how many days made “many.”

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139 Crowley, ’The Soldier and the Hunchback’, 123.
The instructions in ‘Liber Exercitorum’ give more examples of how clarity and precision should be applied to occult exercises. Being primarily a training manual for aspiring students of Scientific Illuminism, it provides specific exercises in some elementary “occult” techniques. There are exercises in ‘physical clairvoyance’, the yogic disciplines of āsana (positions or postures), prānāyāma (control of breath), and dhāranā (control of thought and imagination), and of the general physical aptitude of the student.\(^{140}\) In all these tests and exercises the careful recording of what, exactly, has been done and what, exactly, happened is emphasised. For physical clairvoyance, the student is instructed to guess tarot cards, and carefully note the number of hits and misses. By making exact quantitative figures it can be estimated on thoroughly scientific grounds whether the results are statistically significant or not. This, of course, follows the same logic as the quantitative paradigm in parapsychology that we have discussed at length elsewhere – although critical parapsychologists would no doubt be quick to object to the lack of proper controls and randomisation in the procedure that Crowley proscribed. For the prānāyāma exercise, focused on breathing techniques, Crowley noted that ‘various remarkable phenomena will very probably occur’, which ‘must be carefully analysed and recorded’.\(^{141}\) In dhāranā exercises, which focus entirely on mental phenomena, it becomes even more important to keep records due to the entirely subjective nature of the results.

While the stress on experimentalism that we find in ‘Liber Exercitorum’ appears sincere enough, the effects produced by the experiments are clearly of a radically different kind than those considered in the physical sciences. The exercises of ‘Liber Exercitorum’ generally aim at producing certain mental and/or sensual phenomena in the experimenter. By contrast, experiments in physics or chemistry typically aim at withdrawing the influence of the experimenter as far as possible from the experimental procedure. However, experiments in Scientific Illuminism would not be too far removed from experiments in psychology. Indeed, one could even argue that the significant role Crowley ascribes to keeping “scientific” records constitutes a response to one of the standard methodological problems in psychology, namely the problem of gaining third-person access to first-person experience. We have previously encountered this problem.


\(^{141}\) Ibid., 29.
in the challenges to the introspective method.\textsuperscript{142} It was precisely this problem that the behaviourist school of John Watson and others wanted to overcome by abandoning introspection altogether and focusing solely on measurable behaviour. Crowley’s approach to magic, which for obvious reasons could not reduce the experience away, comes closer to the “experimental introspection” that was common among the structuralists and functionalists, beginning with Wilhelm Wundt’s work in the 1870s.\textsuperscript{143} However this may be, the important point for us to note is that Scientific Illuminism takes the scientific problem of introspection seriously, and tries to overcome it by methods that are analogous to those found in academic psychology.\textsuperscript{144}

Having established that a method for making subjective experience intersubjectively available is a prerequisite for Scientific Illuminism, we should now consider some concrete methods employed to “test” the veracity and validity of magically induced visionary experiences. The testing of higher knowledge in Scientific Illuminism generally takes two forms: verifying empirical factual claims given by spiritual entities in visions ("external" testing), and applying kabbalistically inspired hermeneutical techniques in order to judge the "spiritual" validity of the visions themselves ("internal" testing). The first category, which could be called external testing, is quite straightforward and reminiscent of methods we have seen in various parapsychological research groups. If a “spirit” makes certain claims about the external world, it immediately stands before the empirical tribunal of truth and should be tested accordingly. In a short note published in The International in 1917, Crowley expresses amazement over the lacking will of so many occultists and spiritualists to double-check information from “higher beings” even in cases where it could easily be done. About occultists dabbling with the ouija board, he has this to say: ‘Every inanity, every stupidity, every piece of rubbish, is taken not only at its face value, but at an utterly

\textsuperscript{142} See chapter five.

\textsuperscript{143} See especially Wundt’s Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie (1874), in which the structural study of conscious content through a critical introspective method was spelled out for the first time. See also my discussion in chapter five.

\textsuperscript{144} Elsewhere I have noted the similarities between Crowley’s insistence on making the private experience publically accessible and open for criticism, and the method of “heterophenomenology” in recent philosophy of mind and cognitive science – a method of doing phenomenology that prioritises the third- rather than the first-person perspective. For the argument, see Asprem, “Magic Naturalized?”, 154-156; for heterophenomenology, see especially Daniel Dennett, Consciousness Explained, chapter 4.
exaggerated value. The most appallingly bad poetry will pass for Shelley, if only its authentication be that of the planchette!  

A nice example of practical advice for external testing is found in a letter dated June 19, 1919, where Crowley “corrects” his student Jane Wolfe. Wolfe had claimed to be in contact with an entity named Fee Wah, claiming to be of Chinese origin. Crowley suggested that the entity should therefore be expected to speak some Chinese, and that a test could be run by bringing some classical Chinese literature and ask the spirit to translate. The accuracy of the translation could easily be checked, and judgement passed about the spirit’s authenticity. Dedicated parapsychologists would still be able to object that even a positive result in such a test would not establish much – other hypotheses would remain open, including the extrasensory effects of telepathy and clairvoyance. Crowley seems not to have worried much about alternative hypotheses, however. Even though he allowed himself at some occasions to criticise and even mock the gullibility of certain psychical researchers’ faith in fraudulent mediums, it has to be said that the external tests he himself advocated for Scientific Illuminism, although novel and radical when compared with the state of the art in practical occultism, lacked the methodological sophistication and rigour found in the best parapsychological literature.

More intriguing and novel are Scientific Illuminism’s methods for internal testing of the validity of higher knowledge. For this purpose, an appropriated kabbalistic method is applied in order to check both the validity of spirits encountered, and of the consistency of the visionary experiences themselves. Here we should recall the uses of esoteric hermeneutical strategies mentioned in chapter ten: Crowley’s approach for

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147 See for example the controversies and difficulties surrounding the “cross-correspondence” research of the SPR in the 1900s and 1910s, discussed in chapter eight.
148 In particular, Crowley was skeptical of the rehabilitation of Eusapia Palladino by second-generation psychical researchers such as Everard Fielding and Hereward Carrington. Fielding, who was Honorary Secretary of the SPR, had been an early member of Crowley’s ∴ ∴. As for Carrington, Crowley later came to know him and found himself ‘unable to attach serious credit to anything he said’. He was able to attend a séance with Palladino himself in Naples in 1912, finding further evidence of fraud. See Crowley, Confessions, 680-685. Cf. Asprem, ‘Letturte vitenskapsmenn, skeptisk okkultist’ [“Credulous scientists, sceptical occultist”].
internal testing represents an attempt to reform such methods to make them usable for falsifying data received through visions. Already in the Golden Dawn system of magic, kabbalistic concepts had been reinterpreted and given new functions to fit their syncretistic occult system. There, the Tree of Life with the ten sephirot and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet were utilised as the foundation for an elaborate system of correspondences, to which all other systems could be subsumed. In a ritual setting, this whole body of correspondences was employed in order to invoke certain forces and “intelligences” that the symbols were thought to represent. One discipline in which this was deployed was astral travel, where the symbols were deployed to “guide” the magician to places on the astral plane, in search of arcane knowledge. Crowley adopted the basic framework of this practice, but adapted the use of kabbalah to get an elaborate system for testing and criticising experiences.

As with other occultists, from Eliphas Lévi to Blavatsky, the magicians of the Golden Dawn had worked with an occult cosmology that supposed the existence of a subtle “astral plane”, interpenetrating the phenomenal world. It could be reached and interacted with by virtue of a properly cultivated and disciplined use of the magical imagination. The magician would use various symbolic stimuli to “project” oneself (or one’s astral body) into locations in the astral spheres that one wanted to visit. Once there, visions of foreign landscapes and strange creatures would appear. Interacting with these astral creatures, which could range from lower spirits and fellow magicians, to higher angels and “secret chiefs”, the magician would use his or her knowledge of the symbolic systems provided by the reformed kabbalah. The kabbalah thus worked as a secret grammar of the higher worlds.

In Crowley's Scientific Illuminism, the kabbalistic system used by the Golden Dawn was expanded further and put to use in a more elaborate fashion, not only to induce visions and navigate and communicate with beings once there, as in the Golden Dawn, but also to test the visions in hindsight. In 1909, the same year as Scientific Illuminism was first announced in The Equinox, Crowley published a highly

149 See Asprem, ‘Kabbalah Recreata’.
150 For examples of this kind of astral exploration in the Golden Dawn, see e.g. the reports and testimonies published in Francis King (ed.), Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy. For one expert report, see Moina Mathers, ‘Of Scrying and Travelling in the Spirit-Vision’.
idiosyncratic work on Kabbalah entitled Liber 777.\footnote{For a modern edition, see Crowley, Liber 777 and Other Qabalistic Writings.} This work is really an extensive diagram of some 200 columns, intended to show the “hidden connection” between Roman gods, Taoist concepts, Buddhist meditation practices, concepts from Christian mysticism, magical stones, fragrances, and so on – all subsumed to the framework of the kabbalistic Tree of Life.\footnote{On the creation of this “book”, and relation to similar projects already existing among Golden Dawn members, see Sutin, Do What Thou Wilt, 64.} A couple of years later another innovative Kabbalistic compendium was published as a supplement to The Equinox.\footnote{To The Equinox 1.8 (1912). For a reprint, see Crowley, Liber 777 and Other Qabalistic Writings, part three.} Entitled Sepher Sephirot, this book is a sort of dictionary of Hebrew words arranged on a numeric basis. Exploiting the alphanumeric structure of the Hebrew language (i.e., each letter also has a numerical value) it becomes possible to calculate the numerical sum of words. The esoteric hermeneutical technique based upon this feature is known as gematria: by adding up words, the esoteric scholar “uncovers” hidden structures and correspondences whenever two words produce the same sum. Traditionally, this tool has been used to expand the possibilities of interpretation of scripture beyond the usual range of semantic meanings and syntactical structures. In Scientific Illuminism, gematria is combined with the correspondences presented in Liber 777 to form an important tool for testing visions and making them falsifiable vis-à-vis an “internal” system of reference.

The system thus has two interconnected uses: first, to guide the construction of rituals for specific purposes; second, to test the consistency of the results in light of the established correspondences. In the instruction manual ‘Liber O’,\footnote{Crowley, ‘Liber O’, 13-30.} Crowley gives an example of how this is supposed to work:

Let us suppose that you wish to obtain knowledge of some obscure science. In [Liber 777] column xlv [“Magical powers”], line 12, you will find “Knowledge of Sciences.” By now looking up line 12 in the other columns, you will find that the Planet corresponding is Mercury, its number eight, its lineal figures the octagon and octagram, the God who rules that planet Thoth, or in the Hebrew symbolism Tetagrammaton Adonai and Elohim Tzabaoth, its Archangel Raphael, its choir of Angels Beni Elohim, its Intelligence Tiriel, its
Spirit Taphtarharath, its colours Orange (for Mercury is the Sphere of the Sephira Hod, 8)
Yellow, Purple, Grey and Indigo ...
You would then prepare your Place of Working accordingly.155

What then of the testing of visionary experiences – the “effect”, as it were, of the experiment? The Golden Dawn already emphasised the role of testing visions during the experience: to make sure that what the magician sees is a result of “real magic”, and not simply a product of fantasy and illusion, certain symbols were employed to “banish” fake apparitions.156 Crowley takes this practice a step further, again emphasising the use of the magical record as a way to make subjective experience intersubjectively available and testable:

Apart from the regular tests – made at the time – of the integrity of any spirit, the Magician must make a careful record of every vision, omitting no detail; he must then make sure that it tallies in every point with the correspondences in Book 777 and in “Liber D” [Sepher Sephirot]. Should he find (for instance) that, having invoked Mercury, his vision contains names whose numbers [by gematria] are Martial, or elements proper to Pisces, let him set himself most earnestly to discover the source of error, to correct it, and to prevent its recurrence.157

The occult correspondences set forth in the tables of Liber 777 and in the numerical value of words and names listed in Sepher Sephirot are utilised for checking or verifying the authenticity of the spirits invoked, in hindsight of the visionary experience. The experience itself can never be the final word; there is still the possibility that, when going through the records and double-checking the names and symbolic correspondences found in the visions, one will discover that one had fallen victim to self-deception (e.g., if the names or symbols do not show any meaningful pattern), or been tricked by a “foul spirit” intruding with the operation (if the correspondences follow a wrong pattern, for instance signalling Mars when one had invoked Mercury).

155 Ibid., 15-6.
157 Crowley, ‘Notes for an Astral Atlas’, 505. Emphases added. This piece was written in 1921 at the “Abbey of Thelema” in Sicily, and is thus somewhat later than the first programmatic statements of Scientific Illuminism.
Only by discovering such “errors” is progress in occult knowledge possible. Kabbalistic hermeneutics has been transformed – at least in principle – from being a tool that opens up for expansive interpretations of a text, into a “scientific” formalism that (so it is claimed) makes it possible to assess the validity of magical experiences.

As Crowley wrote in his autobiography, the kabbalah had provided him with a method that was totally compatible with ‘the agnosticism of Huxley’: the method it posited was “scientific” in the sense that it was concerned with the sceptical criticism of “facts”, arrived at by empirical methods. Furthermore, Crowley saw in Scientific Illuminism a way to overcome ‘the historic claim of mystics’ that their experiences were ineffable. He insisted that he found the claim of inherently “inexpressible” ideas repugnant, because of its ‘confession of incompetence and its denial of the continuity of nature’. To overcome this problem, he

subsequently developed a complete system, based on the Cabbala, by which any expression may be rendered cognizable through the language of intellect, exactly as mathematicians have done: exactly, too, as they have been obliged to recognize the existence of a new logic. I found it necessary to create a new code of the laws of thought.

This ‘new code of the laws of thought’ made it possible to overcome the problems of otherwise inexpressible and subjective “gnosis”, and to expand the limits of “reason” into the higher worlds.

3 On Reverence, Skepticism, and Reason Unbound:
Concluding Comparisons

Between Reverence and Skepticism: Contextual Factors

I have strived to make parallels and differences between Steiner’s and Crowley’s systems of higher knowledge appear as clearly as possible through the above presentation, but they must now be addressed directly. Steiner and Crowley share a soteriological understanding of higher knowledge in which the acquisition of “gnosis” is

158 Crowley, Confessions, 511.
159 Ibid., 511-2.
160 Ibid., 512.
necessary for attaining salvation. In fact, they even understand “salvation” in roughly comparable terms, as a radical, individual freedom connected to a “higher I” or a “True Will”. Higher knowledge is necessary in order to distinguish the course of the higher self from the base emotions and random instincts of the physical body; only through attaining knowledge of one’s hidden, higher self, is true autonomy possible. External spiritual beings have a role to play in both of these systems. For Crowley, everything hinges on attaining contact and conversation with one’s Holy Guardian Angel. In Steiner’s system, the initiate will encounter the lesser and greater Guardians of the Threshold, and must deal successfully with these in order to achieve the ultimate goal. We should emphasise that both Steiner’s guardians and Crowley’s angel are described as independent beings that are not simply reducible to a “higher” or “hidden” part of the personality, even though they are intricately connected with such concepts. They remain distinctly “supernatural” entities, even though they can be known and communed with in this life.

This aspect already foreshadows certain similarities in terms of ontology. While we should be careful not to generalise too much, both authors seem to accept a multi-tiered view of reality where the “natural” and the “supernatural” flow into each other, and various “spiritual” planes are accessible from the “material”. The spiritual intervenes in the physical: causal chains exist that link the higher worlds to the lower ones, making it possible for the spiritual to influence and cause changes in the material. Both occultists thus expound worldviews that are in some sense “enchanted”. Nature is not strictly separated from “higher realities”; both metaphysical knowledge and knowledge of how to act and what to value can be achieved without altogether sacrificing one’s intellect.

More substantial differences between the two occultists appear once we take a detailed look at the specifically epistemological dimension of higher knowledge: how can it be obtained in practice? It has to be said that there are similarities even here, especially in that both Steiner and Crowley appear to view higher knowledge primarily as an expansion of reason rather than as unverifiable and incommunicable “gnosis”. I will have more to say about this shortly, but first we must note that the ways of achieving this higher knowledge are notably different for the two authors, verging on the incompatible. While Steiner recommends a path of reverence, Crowley advocates systematic scepticism. Steiner holds doubt and criticism to be grave spiritual dangers, a
certain way to “materialism” and stagnation in occult work. Crowley advocates those very same traits as necessary requirements for avoiding delusion and ensuring true knowledge. Steiner’s demand of “laying oneself open”, bracketing criticism, and accepting the authority of higher visions, is deemed a dangerous practice by Crowley, jeopardising the student’s integrity as well as his progress.

What are we to make of these parallels and differences? What do they tell us about the status of higher knowledge in modern esoteric discourse, and what about the relation of esotericism to the problem of disenchantment? First of all they indicate that it has been possible for esoteric discourses to co-opt quite different philosophical traditions and epistemological positions in the pursuit of similar ends. Steiner’s attempt to get rid of any bias, suspend all critical judgments, and accept impressions directly as they manifest, must be understood in context of his philosophical anti-Kantianism. Steiner’s particular mix of philosophy and esotericism is rather unsurprising in the light of this cultural context, even predictable: the German traditions of idealism and romantic Naturphilosophie were riddled with anti-Kantians, some of which explicitly claimed to stand in a trans-historical lineage of an esoteric perennial philosophy.161 Crowley the autodidact, predictable in his eclecticism but not much else, by contrast advocated higher knowledge through magical invocation while urging his disciples to read Kant, Hume, Huxley, Paine – the very same authorities of the Enlightenment establishment that Steiner had come to reject. The source of Crowley’s obsession with being “scientific” and “methodical” reveals itself in his references to the heroes of late-Victorian naturalism: his general approach bears the imprint of the particularly British struggle with the problem of disenchantment that manifested in the agnosticism controversy at the turn of the century.

The contextual comparison can be taken even further. Steiner grew out of an intellectual culture preoccupied with defining the epistemological differences between the natural and the human sciences, and he came to advocate a method for “spiritual science” that is in its principles of conduct antithetical to that of “natural science”.162 There is an epistemological break between knowledge of the material world and

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162 See e.g. Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*.  

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knowledge of the higher spheres, although both are appropriately called “sciences”, and both lead to true knowledge. This is precisely the kind of break that in more disenchanted corners of philosophy led to the call for an intellectual sacrifice. But in contrast to the neo-Kantianism that informed Weber’s thesis, Steiner held that real, exact knowledge is possible not only of the natural world, but of the higher worlds as well. The break only implies that different methods must be used to reach this knowledge – it is just a question of developing the right methodology.

Crowley, by contrast, comes out of a British naturalistic discourse emphasising the unity of all the sciences, and the continuity between natural, human, social, and even religious knowledge. Following this view, characteristic not only of Huxley and Spencer, but also of the founders of the SPR, the method of science is essentially the same everywhere, and it is the only legitimate path to reliable knowledge. Intriguingly, this naturalistic focus on the unity of knowledge and the superiority of scientific method even manifests in Crowley’s take on hermeneutics: while Steiner described “occult science” as Geisteswissenschaft – following the German struggle to distinguish the humanities from the natural sciences as following uniquely different methodologies – Crowley took the pre-existing hermeneutical aspects of esoteric practice and sought to make them tools for precise scientific demonstration. Thus, remembering my discussion of esoteric hermeneutics in chapter ten, we may say that Crowley adopts hermeneutical discourse not in order to avoid a factual discourse, but to reform esoteric hermeneutical tools into a hermeneutics of suspicion based on a naturalistic conception of “scientific method”. Steiner, in contrast, differentiates between the critical method of the exact sciences, and an empathic method of reverence and worship needed for occult, spiritual science. This distinction mirrors the separation of the humanities and natural sciences emphasised above all in the German-speaking academy, just as much as Crowley’s notion of method mirrors the naturalistic assumptions of the continuity of nature and the unity of the sciences typical of the British intellectual climate of the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

The epistemological differences between Steiner’s and Crowley’s views of higher knowledge thus reflect diverging intellectual contexts. We have already seen these contexts manifest at other levels in this study. Steiner’s “Geheimwissenschaft” was a response to the very same epistemological problems that made Weber call for an intellectual sacrifice and predict the disenchantment of the world. The answers Steiner
found were not quite the same as those formulated by a younger generation of scientists in the 1920s; intriguingly, the anti-disenchantment discourse of the scientists we met in chapter four centred on attacking epistemic optimism and the mechanistic worldview that it was based on, while the older occultist extended that optimism to apply also to the higher worlds. Steiner found his resources in well-established post-Kantian German idealist philosophy, but also in the new cosmology and epistemology of Theosophy. Crowley, on his side, developed Scientific Illuminism from the naturalistic assumptions that had given rise to psychical research and to some of the new natural theologies in Britain. These currents experienced the problem of disenchantment primarily through the confrontation with agnosticism. Following the agnosticism controversy of the late 19th century, however, the intuition of open-ended naturalists had been that whatever can be known in matters of religion, spirituality, or ethics, must be known through scientific methods. While some agnostics might have objected that this criterion automatically excludes the possibility of any proper knowledge in these fields (as they are assumed unfit for scientific inquiry in the first place), the optimists sought to design new scientific methods specifically for the purpose.

If the first point of our contextual comparison was that very different intellectual resources could be co-opted for similar esoteric purposes, we can now move on to conclude with a second point: esoteric views of higher knowledge do not only reflect their contexts, they stand on a continuum with broader and more generally accepted intellectual currents. They do not simply constitute exceptional and “backward” reactions to a “forward-looking” post-Enlightenment establishment. Rather, they respond to pre-existing tensions and internal differences in establishment discourses, concerning the boundaries of knowledge and its attainment, and actively seek support from some of the positions in those discourses. This makes their presumed status as oppositional “rejected knowledge” problematic: the occultists are part of ever-shifting constellations of power and knowledge, facing the same struggles to legitimise themselves as everybody else. In such struggles, everything hinges on making the right connections and securing support from the right sources. Both Steiner and Crowley attempted to find support for some of their views and attitudes within established academic discourse, even while they indulged in knowledge practices that were far removed from the scientific laboratory or the university campus classroom. The point, however, remains that the establishment itself was pluralistic: it had room for variations
and divergences on questions relating to the problem of disenchantment. Some of these debates were even central to the still ongoing struggle to define the epistemological boundaries of academic research. When a comparison is extended between countries, the pluralism of the establishment becomes even broader, as the different contextual influences on Crowley and Steiner illustrate.

**Reason Unbound**

To what extent do the esoteric epistemologies we have considered represent a form of “gnosis”? My tentative answer to this question has been that practices of higher knowledge in modern esoteric discourse typically appear as extensions of reason rather than as gnosis in the technical sense discussed in chapter ten. Higher knowledge is achieved through the use of special faculties and methods, but it is ultimately of a type that can be described to others and double-checked by anyone. It may not be so easy to confirm the knowledge in *practice*, but it is held out as being in *principle* possible. A practical difficulty of confirming claims is, however, nothing special to the esoteric context, but is found in many forms of rational knowledge. An astronaut conducting experiments with gravity on the surface of Mars would, for example, create rational knowledge that could be transmitted back to Earth and understood by anyone. But *strictly speaking* it could only be double-checked, in terms of repeated experiments, by other highly trained Mars-voyaging scientists. Knowledge attained by reading in the “akashic records” would be “rational” claims in exactly this sense; the same goes for knowledge of “ultimate physical atoms” in Theosophy’s occult chemistry, or visions of the spirit of Mercury in Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism. It takes much occult training to acquire the skills, and most people will forever live their lives ignorant of the existence of the hidden potential of their rationality. Is a boundlessly extended reason the *only* type of higher knowledge we see in these sources? What, in that case, are the implications for our understanding of modern esotericism? If boundless reason is the final word, then the occultists’ refusal to undergo an intellectual sacrifice have not only opened the door to knowledge about higher realms, but also spelled the final end of mystery. The epistemic optimism of disenchantment is fully embraced, with its promise of explaining everything without fear of running into any genuinely inexplicable mysteries now extended to the spheres of metaphysics and axiology. This seems to be the implication of Steiner’s knowledge of
the “higher worlds”: once the occult cognitive organs have been awakened, nothing can escape the lucid rational mind of the esoteric philosopher. Everything is as clear as day to him: he knows the origin of the universe and the most arcane history of our species; he sees the spiritual forces working on the destiny of races, peoples, nations, and individuals; even future incarnations are under his control. If the “disenchantment of the world” meant the disappearance of incalculable, mysterious forces from nature, then Steiner’s occult science promised to dispel the same mystery from the higher worlds.

Steiner’s unbounded rationalism is, however, only one response to the problem of disenchantment among others, and borrows its ambitions of complete rational knowledge from German idealism. Crowley’s system, having borrowed from the sceptical British empiricist tradition, does in fact not hold up the promise of total knowledge and universal explanations: it promises higher knowledge of self, and ways to access higher worlds and commune with various “praeterhuman” beings, some less trustworthy than others. Scientific Illuminism provides tools and techniques modelled on a methodology of naturalism and common sense. These tools are used to build knowledge that is as secure as it can be under the circumstances, but they do not promise to give universal explanations. Visions can be checked, and the trustworthiness of various spirit-beings tested against “kabbalistic” protocols, but these are merely methods of dealing with uncertainty and of handling essentially unpredictable realities.

That much was the case already with medieval and early modern grimoires, which tried as best as they could to equip the magician with tools to master and control unruly spirits. Essentially unpredictable realities do, however, exist, and this is where Crowley differs from the “disenchanted” view: there are genuinely mysterious, incalculable powers at work in this world, powers that can only partially be tamed and controlled by the use of magical methods enforced with science. Intriguingly, Crowley’s system thus appears more straightforwardly “enchanted” than that of Steiner. Naturalistic methods are devised to deal with genuinely mysterious and incalculable beings, in this world and in others, but there is no prospect of finally taming the demons or understanding everything perfectly. Perhaps ironically, as a result of his guarded scepticism, Crowley appears to avoid the complete “disenchantment of the higher

163 See e.g. Asprem, ‘False, Lying Spirits’.
worlds” that looms before Steiner’s disciples. He avoids it because he does not, in the end, follow the strong epistemic optimism that holds complete factual explanations to be possible in the first place.

A paradox similar to the one faced by Steiner was noted by Hanegraaff as an afterthought to his work on the New Age movement of the late 20th century. The New Age movement ‘tends to seek salvation in universal explanatory systems which will leave no single question of human existence unanswered, and will replace mystery by the certainty of perfect knowledge’.164 In esoteric visions where the extension of reason leads to totalising claims of higher knowledge that encapsulates “life, the universe and everything”, this is indeed the consequence. But we might ask, is there nothing left whatsoever of gnosis – the personal, direct, intimate and ineffable type that has been seen as typical of esoteric claims to higher knowledge? Little is left of it except the actual experiential dimension of attaining knowledge itself. Having read Steiner’s Knowledge of the Higher Worlds, the occult student would still not know what it feels like traveling on the astral plane, seeing the true essence of a plant, or perceiving higher worlds directly. The personal experience, the sensation itself is the final incommunicable aspect. But embedded in a broader structure of precise rational knowledge, is not the experiential dimension merely analagical to our astronaut’s personal experience of the gravitational pull of Mars, as opposed to the quantitative data produced by his experiments with the same phenomenon? This hardly counts as gnosis; it is merely an exotic case of the philosophical problem of qualia.165

It is only in the soteriological goal of higher knowledge that we find something more than unbounded reason. The most gnosis-like event in Steiner’s system is the final, personal meeting with the Guardian of the Threshold; for Crowley, the parallel is the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel. No-one can tell the initiate exactly what to expect from these final encounters, although the path to it will have been explained in excruciating detail. In the final moment of soteriological gnosis there is, at last, the promise of a genuinely surprising experience. The broader significance of that experience would, however, have been revealed long before in textbooks, leaflets, and lectures: the experience will show him the way to absolute freedom. Deeply personal questions will now be answered: who am I, and what is my place in the

164 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 524
165 E.g. Thomas Nagel, ‘What is It Like to be a Bat?’. 
grander scheme of things? The final answer silences the final question. Thus freedom, too, attained through gnosis, dissolves the final mystery: it means, essentially, to learn of one’s pre-ordained destiny, and pledge to follow it thenceforth with eyes wide open.