

The Epistemological Foundations of Esoteric Thought and Practice

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Esoteric thought and practice is shown to be founded on a theory of knowledge that fundamentally differs from conventional contemporary academic epistemology. Esotericism is monist, and esoteric knowledge is acquired in a moment of intuition when sensory perception and thought combine. The internal logic of such a system is demonstrated with the examples of the Tarot and Anthroposophy. Dominant positivist and empirical studies of New Age and related phenomena fail to appreciate these epistemological foundations of esotericism.

1. Notions and Functions of Knowledge

Ever since Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) introduced the sociology of knowledge, we have become aware that knowledge is not a single entity, that is, not a timeless and ongoing process or achievement. Different communities and different ages have embraced distinguishably different kinds of knowledge, and thus every form of knowledge needs to be contextualised with regard to its place and function in a society or in a certain segment of that society.

Moreover, competing kinds of knowledge have various foundations: they can be based on confirmed traditions or canonical texts, on practical experience, or on deviating epistemological insights and persuasions. This can cause discussions at cross-purposes, for example, when scientific or scholarly knowledge encounters religious knowledge.

Knowledge is an important constituent of religion, but when scholars of religion approach their objects of research, a clash of incompatible concepts of knowledge can often ensue. Such a clash occurs in the study of esotericism and New Age. Here, the problem is particularly virulent, because New Age claims a paradigm shift from a Cartesian to a holistic perception of the world. New Agers question scholars' quests for 'objectivity' even before those scholars study New Agers' beliefs. Thus, the

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necessary communication between adherents and researchers is particularly hampered.

As David Hume argued convincingly, varying understandings of knowledge arise from diverging ways of constructing a correlation between the external world of objects and the human internal world of sensual impressions and ideas (Hume 1758: Section II). In what might generally be called ‘the Modern Age’, inclusive of our own age, knowledge which can be arrived at by any one individual or group working with the same methodological tool as another individual or group – so called ‘objective’ knowledge – is held in highest esteem. Additionally, in the modern West, we embrace the idea that different institutions of society are in charge of different kinds of knowledge, and the responsibility for ‘objective’, ‘scientific’ knowledge is normally ascribed to schools and universities. Scientific knowledge at best is expected to arrive at ‘facts’, and any result must be replicable and thus provable by any person using the same tools and methodology. Because of this quality, scientific knowledge claims to be independent from individual interests and opinions as well as from cultural settings. Its basic epistemological assumption is that the external world of objects can be perceived through the five senses of the human subject, and even better when these are aided by technical instruments. The mode in which the scientific examiner approaches the world is always causal, ie the scientific researcher looks for ‘facts’ that are ‘reasons’ and ‘consequences’.

This kind of knowledge is expected to be strictly distinguished from ‘belief’, which particularly in the Christian tradition is the realm reserved for what might be called ‘religious knowledge’, associated with faith in the unknown and unknowable and supported by divine revelation. However, the complete exclusion of religious knowledge from the more generally acceptable, universal knowledge of the scholarly and particularly the scientific kind is relatively new. In the history of ideas, many other forms of knowledge have been promoted and later neglected. Esoteric knowledge uses epistemological tools and assumptions from older traditions going back to antiquity.

The most prominent of these traditions is the conception of the world – including the human being – as One. This doctrine, which is essential to all variants of esoteric thought, originated as early as ancient Egyptian theology and has been formulated throughout the ages in monistic worldviews. Other important thought patterns for esotericists include teachings about the four elements – fire, water, air, and earth – which appeared for the first time in pre-Socratic philosophy; the tenet of a congruency of microcosm and

macrocosm, coming from Hermetic thought; the spiritual quality of matter, also coming from Hermeticism; and the maxim about a concurrence of sensual perception and thinking, which was expressed by various currents in Hellenistic philosophy.

Many esoteric currents claim the knowable (in the sense of objective and scientific knowledge) is merged with the unknowable (those areas usually reserved for belief and faith). One of the main challenges of esotericism for contemporary scholars is its refusal of the fundamental presupposition that these two conceptions of knowledge are, according to the scientific worldview, separate. Most followers of esoteric paths have no difficulty with the combination of the knowable and unknowable. To esotericists, the knowable is also always spiritual (or, conversely, the ineffable is manifested and thus knowable), and therefore habitually crosses – even wedges – the boundaries between religious persuasion and scientific knowledge.

Critics inspired by the Christian creed and scholars inspired by the demand for objectivity have been puzzled by this attitude towards ‘the ineffable’, and have been reluctant to label modern esotericism a religion proper. Instead, they have identified esotericism as a set of beliefs that exposes itself too much to secularism (Zinser 1992),¹ thus dismissing the fact that the combination of religion and acquired knowledge in esotericism is intentional.

Esotericism does not and has indeed no intention of meeting a number of other premises in mainstream scholarship of our age, including:

- the detachment of a researcher from her or his object of study; the resulting distinction of emic and etic positions;
- the transparency and lucidity of what can be known;
- the restriction to a two-valent logic, according to which A is identical with A, A is non-identical with B, and any third possibility is excluded; and
- the distinction between empirical matter and unempirical ideas, related to the distinction between natural life and intellectual life, an understanding according to which exhaustive insight into immaterial realms is impossible.

In other words, esotericism contests the Kantian limitation of human cognitive faculty as regards the categories of space and time. From an esoteric perspective, the human cognitive faculty is generally considered to be unlimited, although how ‘open’ this faculty is in any given individual

depends entirely on whatever stage of intellectual and spiritual development that individual has reached. With regard to the truth of his or her arguments, esotericists posit exclusive value on the efforts of the human mind and, as a consequence, diminish the principle of the natural authority of a person. Up to the present day, the authority of the 'initiated' or 'enlightened' spiritual leader remains unquestioned in esoteric circles.

The development of mainstream epistemology in the western history of ideas could be described as a process of reductions. Important terms designating intellectual capacities and operations, which were formerly distinct, have been combined, unified, and thus simplified. For example, in modern times, we commonly think of a dichotomy of the material (matter) and the immaterial, which has subsumed a number of concepts like mind (intellect), spirit and soul. In ancient and medieval philosophies, however, these concepts – and more – were clearly distinguished and their functions analysed in great detail. Moreover, mental performances like contemplating, meditating, speculating or intuiting, nowadays considered unfounded, were historically employed and examined as serious epistemological tools. Some esotericists, who are concerned about epistemology, have taken up those endeavours and developed them in a way that serves their monistic understanding of divine, natural, and intellectual life.

It is, however, difficult clearly to contour esoteric approaches to reality. Already in antiquity, esotericism emerged from religious and philosophical eclecticism, a reservoir of Greek and Graeco-Egyptian mystery cults, Jewish and Neoplatonic currents, the latter of which combined elements from clearly distinguishable philosophical schools such as the Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Stoic. In the course of its history, esotericism retained concepts that were forgotten, repudiated or marginalised by mainstream intellectual history and Christian mainstream theology. Thus, the various components of esoteric epistemology ended up either to be placed in the history of heretical thought or to be considered obsolete as useful means for analysing or interpreting the world and human existence.

2. Aims and Methodology

In this paper, I hope to show that esotericism is a form of knowledge in its own right, and that it makes sense when it is judged on its own merits. In the context of epistemology, I define esotericism as a monistic form of thought which is particularly concerned with the congruencies of material phenomena with spiritual (ie immaterial) ideas attached to those natural phenomena. All esoteric practices, from religious or magical traditions from all over the

world, aim at an awareness of the ultimate unity and wholeness of the natural and intelligible worlds. Belief in the unity of matter and spirit does, of course, include the human mind in its efforts to know, to understand and to explain the universe and our role in it.

In the course of this approach, I argue explicitly against the positivist interpretation of esoteric knowledge presented by Olav Hammer in his monograph *Claiming Knowledge* (2001), and also against the notion of the purely ‘empirical’ study of esotericism suggested by Wouter Hanegraaff in his article “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism” (1995). Both of these approaches are deeply indebted to positivism. Karl Mannheim was not exactly on target when he said that positivism was “the philosophy of lacking philosophy” (Mannheim 1970:329). Positivism is contingent upon the concept of a human subject that is able to perceive empirical sensations, and the constructed identity of the occidental subject is grounded in the notion of a personal and individual god (the God of the Bible). God as person and the human being as individual are metaphysical concepts, with the logical result that positivism implicitly relies on the very metaphysics it purports to reject.

This argument concurs with what François Lyotard has called the “metanarrative of modernity”. Lyotard showed the dependency of knowledge in the modern western world on two metanarratives: one concerned with the emancipation of humankind from natural and political restrictions, and the other concerned with the self-development of the human mind. Neither of these presuppositions has logically a self-sufficient grounding. So-called “empirical” versus “metaempirical” (Hanegraaff 1995) – or “analytical” versus “hermeneutical” (Hammer 2001:XV n3) – examinations of esotericism appear to have completely ignored the fact that critical thought itself relies on questionable assumptions, which are centred mainly in the postulation of a self-sustainable subject that is able to cut itself off from its surroundings and perceive them as ‘empirical facts’. The meaning of the world which is thus constituted by these ‘facts’ is either carried out of perception into the realm of the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ or, for positivists, does not exist at all and we are supposed to do without any meanings and are left with meaningless ‘facts’. Thus it is clear that a positivist approach to the world and to any object of study has its shortcomings, just as any other epistemological methodology.

Since esoteric ways of gaining, shaping, and expressing insight do not fit ‘objective’ demands formulated by an exclusively positivist understanding of knowledge, several thousand years of intellectual history appear to Olav

Hammer not even as a sequence of dark ages, but rather as a block of mental gloom. Hammer introduced the term “Augustinian worldview” as a model for New Age thought (Hammer 2001:3). This “Augustinian worldview” covers a number of worldviews, philosophies and theologies, the only common characteristic of which is that they are “pre-Enlightenment”. Apart from the fact that it is hardly pertinent to subsume about 1500 years of intellectual history under the name of a single theologian, New Agers have never said that they wish to return to pre-Enlightenment or “Augustinian” conditions. Instead, they often place themselves in eastern or in largely unorthodox traditions, which for the most part of have been explicitly anti-Augustinian. Moreover, as I have shown elsewhere (Iwersen 2003:II.6, II.7), esotericism and New Age share cultural traits with both modernism and postmodernism. Thus it is impossible to characterise esotericism and New Age as historically ‘backwards’, however true it is that most esotericists are traditionalists – this means simply that esotericists employ ancient concepts and combine them with newer ones rather than breaking with them.

The deficiencies of a positivist approach cannot be deflected by Wouter Hanegraaff’s attempt to introduce an “empirical method” to the study of esoteric ideas. Hanegraaff attempts to overcome the reductionism essential to positivism by offering yet another presumably ‘neutral’ scholarly viewpoint, which concedes that there might be a meta-empirical reality, but declares it to be inaccessible for research (Hanegraaff 1995:107-8). I hope to show in the following that the problems in understanding esoteric viewpoints are not related to the nature of meta-empirical or metaphysical insight, but instead to different ways of observing, framing, and interpreting the empirical world. It will be seen that empiricism as a form of close observation is extremely important in esoteric epistemology, and that it is not easy to separate an ‘empirical’ from a ‘meta-empirical’ sphere. On the contrary, esoteric knowledge results from a coincidence of the two. Hanegraaff’s underlying assumption that the empirical and the non-empirical realm are genuinely different and therefore must be kept separate is not shared by esotericists.

Attempts to be ‘objective’ about esotericism typically end up by dismissing its premises, which is also true for the harsh confrontation of an etic to an emic interpretation, claimed as the only suitable method by both Hanegraaff and Hammer (Hanegraaff 1996:5).² Of course, it cannot hurt to clarify the position of an esotericist and a particular scholar, but the emic-etic distinction is itself based on the notion of a researching subject scrutinising an object, and thus on Cartesian epistemology. As we will see, esoteric

epistemology seeks to gain knowledge precisely by overcoming such a Cartesian subject-object separation.

While working on this paper, I came across an interesting column by Umberto Eco (1995), in which he compared different philosophies to different card games.³ This is an appropriate comparison, given that philosophies consist of discursive rules for creating different meanings for a single and shared world, much as card games are based on rules for how to play different games but with a single set of cards. Bridge is played according to different rules from poker, and esotericism interprets the world in a different way from positivism. You can like or dislike bridge, poker or esotericism, and you can certainly make judgements on the grounds of your liking or distaste, but it doesn't make sense to play bridge by applying the rules of poker, and also it doesn't make sense to try to understand esotericism in the light of positivism, empiricism, or objectivism.

Following this kind of logic, the approach to esotericism advocated here is hermeneutical. Adherents of esoteric teachings find a great deal of sense in their approaches to interpreting the world, but the logical appeal of esotericism has yet to be fully explained. A denial that esotericism makes sense from an etic, ie so-called scholarly perspective, begs the question. The underlying proposition that esotericism cannot be explained because it is, well, esoteric, does nothing to help us understand the phenomenon before us, and is thus epistemologically unhelpful. Hermeneutics is a means of a first elucidation of the phenomenon. Aside from the fact that scholarly enquiry may be carried out in a number of different ways (as long as the methodological presuppositions are explained), hermeneutics has the advantage of being aware of its own partiality. Hermeneutics willingly creates a bridge between the emic and the etic because it knows that every viewpoint has its limitations and therefore requires expansion in order to come closer to something like truth.

Unfortunately, explicit epistemological considerations by esotericists themselves are rare and come from traditions which are historically diverse. Being aware of this problem, I will draw on materials from ancient Hermeticism and from twentieth century Anthroposophy, simply because these two bodies of texts are among the most telling with regard to epistemology. The probability of historical connections between the hermetic tradition which originated during the first centuries CE and modern esoteric schools like the Anthroposophical movement founded by Rudolf Steiner in 1912/13 will be considered below.

As my prime model for demonstrating esoteric epistemology at work, I will use various images and interpretations of Tarot cards. As far as is definitely proven, the Tarot card game was invented in Italy by the end of the fifteenth century.⁴ In the later eighteenth century, the French esotericist Antoine Court de Gébelin (1719-84) was the first to link the Tarot pack with Hermeticism. With that link he founded a line of esoteric knowledge which was then developed by the circuit of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Tarot offers symbolic images on which numerous esotericists have commented and explained ways of construing, transmitting, and perceiving esoteric knowledge.

The most outstanding interpreter of the Tarot is Valentin Tomberg, alias the Anonymus d'Outre Tombe (1900-73). His *Meditations on the Major Arcana*, published after his death in 1973,⁵ are a rich source on various aspects of esoteric epistemology. Tomberg regarded himself as a Christian Hermeticist. At a younger age, he was deeply involved with Anthroposophy, and although he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1945 and considered himself independent from any particular esoteric school, his views are closely bound up with Anthroposophical teachings. Tomberg was inspired by the images of the Marseilles Tarot dating back to the turn of the seventeenth century. I will refer to these cards throughout this paper, and will also refer to the so-called Crowley pack, created by Frieda Harris (1877-1962). Harris' imagery was influenced by ideas of the eccentric Aleister Crowley (1875-1962) and is less Christian, therefore reflecting the significant move of twentieth century esotericism towards paganism. Crowley himself authored extensive comments on Harris' cards in his *Book of Thoth* (first published in 1944).⁶

I will additionally make reference to the Tarot pack and interpretations by the French esotericist Oswald Wirth (1860-1943). Wirth depicted the Tarot as a way of initiation, representing the esoteric notion of different qualities of knowledge reflecting a student's standing on the ladder of cognition. Wirth was the first to apply the ideas of nineteenth century esotericism (particularly Papus and Eliphas Lévi), to the symbolism of the Tarot, and both Crowley and Tomberg are indebted to Wirth in this respect.

3. The Formation and Transmission of Esoteric Thought

The fact that indisputable parallels exist between epistemology in ancient and medieval Hermeticism and modern esoteric systems such as Anthroposophy and twentieth century readings of the Tarot, raises the important question about the transmission of ideas in the history of esotericism. Worldviews are

creative responses of human beings to the conditions of which and in which they are part. Esotericism is no exception, and it is possible to determine the particular circumstances in which this kind of world conception evolves in and through people who are trying to make sense of them: this is the collision of opposing, alternative interpretations of the world which call for harmonisation.

The first record we have of such a situation is from Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE. It emerged as a crisis within ancient Egyptian polytheism that reached its peak in Akhenaten's religious revolution introducing monotheistic sun-worship. The revolution did not last, however. After Akhenaten's death, the manifold cults in Egypt were reinstated. As a consequence of the attempt to privilege one god against all the others – which was not compatible with ancient Egyptian mentality and thus came as a shock – a monistic inclusive theology was developed that contained clear esoteric traits: the highest form of the divine was concealed in the sense that it was non-figurative and impersonal, while the other godheads and the cosmic forces they personified could be interpreted as specific embodiments of the otherwise inconceivable and indeterminable Oneness. That Oneness is nothing other than the whole of the cosmos (Assmann 1993).

This kind of monistic worldview with its ancient Egyptian setting was vividly expressed from the first through the third century CE in the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of texts in Greek, which were supposedly revelations by the Egyptian wisdom god Thoth in his appearance as Hermes Trismegistos.⁷ Although Hermes Trismegistos is a syncretistic figure (the Greek god Hermes was equated with the Egyptian Thoth), and the texts show influences from various philosophical schools including Hellenistic interpretations of Judaism, they contain significant passages claiming Egypt's superior position as “the temple of the world”,⁸ lamenting the exploitation of Egyptian lands by Graeco-Roman colonists⁹ and defending and protecting Egyptian religious knowledge against Greek scientific specialisation¹⁰ and curiosity.¹¹ Unfortunately, the authors of the Hermetic Corpus are unknown, but it is highly probable that these topics not only reflect the pride of Egyptian priests, but also a great deal of Greek cultural self-criticism.

It seems that Hermetic religiosity gained (and continues to gain) its appeal mainly from a social situation which posed an intellectual challenge. This challenge was the confrontation of a traditional worldview with other ways of perceiving reality. It can be clearly shown that esotericism flourished in

places and periods when several religions and worldviews were forced to coexist. In Egypt this situation emerged within one culture that had many regional cults. A need for inclusion also emerged later on in the Roman empire, particularly within the eastern provinces with their ancient mental habits and specific milieus. During the Middle Ages, Spain was a stronghold of esoteric thought, because members of the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities had to coexist under the same political rule and thus influenced each other. In the Renaissance it was mainly intellectual curiosity and general open-mindedness that made people study non-familiar traditions in order to reform their inherited understanding of the meaning of the world. The information then accessible, again from the study of Greek and Hebrew texts, challenged the traditional medieval worldview. A similar situation occurred in the later nineteenth century through the availability of Oriental religious and philosophical sources in the West.

Currently we are living in an age of increasing globalisation that has its origins in European imperialism. It has been suggested that we are moving towards or are even already in a clash of civilisations (Huntington 1998/1996).¹² The clash might bring about political struggles for identity – and obviously does so in some places – but it also brings forth productive merging at the cultural and religious level. As we shall see in what follows, monism provides a basis for many meanings relative to each other and always open for further and extended interpretation. Thus, esoteric inclusivity is certainly one way of handling the confrontation of culturally varying worldviews. Once Hermeticism was shaped in antiquity, it presented a repository of ideas which has never become mainstream in the West, but always held the field of alternative viewpoints. Recent studies show that the Hermetic tradition never broke up completely even during the Middle Ages¹³ and was then revived by various personages and intellectual movements during the Renaissance and Reformation periods.

From an epistemological perspective, it is highly unlikely that scientific discoveries and ‘secularisation’ were the main inspirations for the formation of esoteric thought in early modern times.¹⁴ Aside from the fact that the Renaissance had far more to do with the philology of philosophical texts from antiquity (the heart of the ‘liberal arts’) than with the natural sciences (the ‘mechanical arts’) (Burke 1996:31-33), scientific inventions are usually preceded by changes of epistemology, rather than initiating them. Similarly, it is certainly true that esotericists of the twentieth century argued against the critical achievements of Kant and Descartes, but they could not have done so without any philosophical basis of their own. Scientific discoveries *per se*,

such as electro-magnetic waves and theories about the evolution of humankind, cannot serve as epistemological tools for obvious reasons. It is therefore not justifiable to make progress in the sciences responsible for the emergence of modern esotericism with the Renaissance and later with the discovery of magnetism in the eighteenth century.

The foundational ideas of esotericism did not arise from modern science, even though some new scientific discoveries have been interpreted as supporting ancient esoteric views insofar as they were understood as undermining basic assumptions of Cartesian and Kantian epistemology (eg Capra 1975, 1985). Quantum physics, for example, is understood to teach that an observer can never completely fade out of the process of his experiment, and the revolution in geometry in the nineteenth century up to Einstein's theory of relativity has considerably changed the scientific understanding of space that Kant considered to be unchangeable. Because they felt their worldview was confirmed by the new sciences, esotericists sometimes hoped to formulate it with the same degree of precision as scientists were thought to be able to. However, the most interesting issue about the new discoveries was their seeming congruence with eastern mysticism – at a time when the western esoteric tradition had not yet been fully rediscovered.

The influence of Darwin's theory of evolution on the formation of modern esotericism is often overestimated. A concept of evolution is inherent to an esoteric understanding of the cosmos. The cosmos is interpreted as an expression of the unfolding of the divine One into the multiplicity of the world, and the aim of the evolutionary and historical process is a restitution of Oneness, which is supposed to bring about a higher level of consciousness to every part of the whole, that is to every element or individual included in that Oneness. The ascent of the human soul to the divine sphere, a prominent theme in Pagan, Jewish, gnostic and Christian sources of antiquity, is usually understood as a counter-movement to the previous descent of the divine. Moreover, evolution in the esoteric sense unfolds principles and structures that are inherent in the creational plan even from the very early stages of development. Therefore, Darwin's later ideas about the origin of human beings from primates was rejected by Theosophists, Anthroposophists and other, independent thinkers,¹⁵ for it did not correlate with the ancient esoteric concept of a primal man or *Adam kadmon* – a kabbalistic term which is adopted in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*. Human beings have a privileged position in the cosmos in the sense that they possess a full means of salvation. Both Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner postulate an original divine

plan for human beings, which was then and still is in the process of an ongoing realisation in the course of the evolutionary process. Minerals, plants and animals are seen as having not attained such a position in the original plan, but fell by the wayside. Valentin Tomberg presents these ideas and denies their relation to Darwinism in his meditation on Major Arcanum X, “The Wheel” (Anonymus 1983/1973:vol 2, 251-89).

It is simply a misconception to interpret modern esoteric evolutionism as a secularisation of earlier esotericism in the light of Darwinism. Evolutionism in esotericism is a very old belief indeed that may be traced as far as the myth of the fall of the souls in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which in turn is considered to be Orphic in origin. Comparable myths are to be found in Gnosticism, Plotinus’ Neoplatonic philosophy and medieval Kabbalah. All of these myths try to come to terms with the imperfection or incompleteness of humankind. Human beings are presumed to belong originally to a realm of the divine. Their present condition in the current state of things is interpreted as a consequence of some kind of accident during the creation process. The failure of creation as it was intended leaves the human being with a responsibility to restore what was intended. Humankind is supposed to revert to its originally divine state and the most important requirement for that is the development of a true understanding of the history of creation and the nature of humanity.

It is obvious that this concept of development has nothing to do with Darwinian evolution. Apart from their foundation in traditional esoteric myths, parallel Theosophical and Anthroposophical views about evolution are much more credibly indebted to Hegelian philosophy, which was overwhelmingly influential in nineteenth century historical thought, and no less evolutionist than Darwin’s theory *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Little attention has been given to the fact that Blavatsky argued in detail against Darwinism, favouring the alternative evolutionary theory of Alfred Russel Wallace, which was more compatible with the esoteric tradition. Wallace explicitly excluded humanity from the principles of natural selection as formulated by Darwin. Like Wallace, Blavatsky defended the esoteric conception that the human being is a reflection of a spiritual original image or idea (in the Platonic sense of the word) that has existed from the beginning of time (Blavatsky 1999:684f). Here too, Blavatsky did not invent anything new, but built on ideas from esoteric tradition, which she renewed or updated according to the *Zeitgeist*. Her rebellious pupil, Steiner, as always, re-established traditional esoteric views more completely. He followed the line

of Goethe and confirmed the concept of metamorphosis, a distinct concept of evolutionism which gives full credit to the development of the individual form – including the human personality.

Of course, when connecting ancient Egyptian developments with those in the Greek provinces of the Roman empire, with Muslim Spain, the Renaissance, and with ‘modern esotericism’ from the nineteenth century onwards, we need to consider historical gaps. Yet serious studies in European history of the later use or interpretation of Egyptian thought have shown an underground tradition at work that has so far been little recognised in the history of ideas. It is therefore appropriate to re-evaluate the claim of many esotericists that their teachings have roots in ancient Egypt. Some scholars of esotericism have gruffly rejected this claim, ignoring recent methodological debates of historians in academic circles as a result. They simply persist in the provability of the ‘factual’ as opposed to ‘metaphysical’ concepts. This is an outdated concept. Hayden White, one of the most distinguished contemporary methodologists of historiography, has shown ‘factual’ discourse to be just as ‘fictitious’ as any other discourse (White 1973, 1979). In 1979 (German edn 1988), the historian Carlo Ginzburg published his well-known essay *Spie*, in which he called for a new methodological paradigm that would avoid simplifying contrasts between “rational” and “irrational” approaches to history through a revival of original approaches of deciphering signs and indications.

Certainly there is no one continuous line of transmission for ideas that emerged in ancient Egypt to the present day. However, branches of cultural studies (along with the insights of Carlo Ginzburg) provide valuable clues as to how ideas are passed on in the history of consciousness. They refer to a cultural memory of humankind that does not rely on recorded facts, but preserves historical experiences and transmits them over long periods of time. Alongside the inventory of memories that makes every human being the cultural heir of previous generations, libraries provide a very efficacious support system. Renaissance scholars, among whom esoteric knowledge was very popular, were book lovers and keen on the discovery and restoration of ancient texts. Their own books were then used by the esotericists of the nineteenth century. There is, for example, absolutely no doubt that Eliphas Lévi, one of the renewers of esotericism in recent times, used Agrippa von Nettesheim’s *Philosophia Occulta* (1530/1510) as his most important source.

To the present day, the Theosophical society maintains several remarkable libraries, the most famous being the collection in Chennai.

Anthroposophists, too, care a great deal about books and literary traditions and have their own publishing houses. Even New Agers, who are often not regarded the most learned of esotericists, have made bookshops one of the most visible expressions of their existence. It needs to be stressed here again, that the esoteric tradition is not a critical one. The texts esotericists draw on can be of very different provenance and historical or literary quality, but nevertheless they are texts, even if they reflect obscure branches of cultural memory and off-the-track intellectual creativity.

Esoteric legend has it that the symbols of the Tarot set reflect the knowledge of the ancient Egyptians. This idea could have emerged because the origin of the 22 trumps is unknown. There is some historical proof suggesting an Egyptian origin for the first European card games in the Mamluk period (Dummett 1980:40-42), and thus considerably later than Pharaonic times. However, so far there exists no fully persuasive explanation for the peculiarity of another 21 Jokers (the major Arcana of esoteric Tarot) in addition to the single traditional Fool card. It is assumed that the trumps were created in the nineteenth century when card sets with only one Joker were not yet established as a norm (Dummett 1980:78), and that they were used at Renaissance courts for entertainment purposes. The allegorical imagery of the trumps has been linked to a Renaissance tradition of staging triumphal processions, so that one card trumps over another, because its imagery reflects a higher quality (Dummett 1980:87).¹⁶ However, this theory is only convincing if a meaningful succession of the cards can be established, ie if the trumps can be ordered in a way that one card is always on top of the previous one. As far as I know, this is not possible. The succession of the cards is not clear, but varies from pack to pack and from interpreter to interpreter.

Antoine Court de Gébelin, inventor of the occult Tarot, 200 years after the first recorded appearance of Tarot cards, attributed symbolic meanings to the trumps which, according to him, derived from ancient Egyptian religion. His ideas were quickly taken up by other authors with esoteric inclinations,¹⁷ among them a Comte de M, who published an essay as an appendix to Gébelin's *Le Monde Primitif* (1781:vol III), naming the game of Tarot the *Book of Thoth*; and the fortune-teller Etteilla (d 1791), who in *La Cartomancie Française* (1783) introduced a new method of fortune-telling using the Tarot, and also referred to the Tarot as the *Book of Thoth*. Aleister Crowley followed this model, and likewise published his explanations of the Tarot with the title, *Book of Thoth* (1944).

However, as Crowley knew, there are also other theories on the origins of the Tarot. The role of the Gypsies can be viewed as significant in the transmission of the Tarot, whether an Egyptian or even an Indian origin (Golowin 1981:14-17) is considered. In any case, most esotericists agree that the images of the Tarot cards contain initiatory wisdom from ancient times. Many esotericists assume that the Tarot contains the ‘original wisdom of humankind’ which goes far back into prehistory and even to legendary places like Atlantis (eg with reference to Papus, Leuenberger 1986:17-18). Quite original is the view of Oswald Wirth, who believed that it was a work by “mysteriously inspired” medieval painters (Wirth 1978:32).

4. The Doctrine of Esoteric Monism and the Rudiments of Monistic Knowledge

Esoteric thought and practice is founded on belief in the Oneness of the world and the Oneness of truth. It is a most inclusive worldview, and thereby relatively flexible. Various theories regarding the inherent Oneness of all being have been named, for example monism, pantheism, panentheism, mysticism, cosmotheism, holism, hylozoism, or panvitalism. Cosmotheism and its historical background and content were discussed above. However, since a congruent line of thought stemming from Egyptian cosmotheism, and leading to nineteenth century eclectic esotericism, cannot, at this point, be established, I prefer to speak of ‘esoteric monism’. The term ‘monism’ was introduced by the German philosopher Christian Wolff in the eighteenth century. It derives from a Greek term previously used by Aristotle, and very generally points to the idea that there is only one substance, or essence, of the whole of organic as well as non-organic life. The form of monism suggested and applied by adherents of esoteric paths can be defined as follows:

Esoteric monism is religious, insofar as Oneness is equated with the Divine. Whether ‘Divinity’ is understood in a personal or an impersonal manner depends upon personal preference. Moreover, the Oneness is generally of such an unspecific kind that many religious creeds appear to be compatible with it. Esoteric monism is inclusive of many concepts of Divinity, originating from different historical and cultural backgrounds and is, therefore, highly eclectic.

In point of fact, esoteric monism is usually connected with magical practice, since it is typically believed that Oneness needs to be experienced. Insight into the conviction that the Divine and the whole of the material world are one cannot be restricted to the intellect alone. Esotericists are practitioners of

mental exercises, such as meditation, as well as of physical exercises, such as yoga, rituals and techniques of divinisation, including the use of Tarot cards.

Esotericism's closeness to magic is explained by their sharing of a particular evaluation of matter. The roots of this attitude can be found in ancient Hermeticism. Ralph Liedtke has termed Hermeticism a philosophy of matter that perceives and understands the material world as something numinous.¹⁸ With its monistic foundations, esotericism differs from metaphysical systems which value the immaterial over the material; instead, esotericism appreciates the material cosmic as a carrier and a conveyor of the spiritual. Since spirit and matter are understood in esotericism as ultimately One, the material world can be viewed as the visible aspect of the intelligible world. This is of major importance for esoteric cognitive theory. Esoteric thought never becomes entirely abstract, but retains a sensory bearing. Therefore, esoteric thinking is often described as 'organic' cogitation and thoughts are understood by esotericists as living entities (Jongen 1998:13) – in contrast to 'dead' thinking in the abstract mode. Rational reasoning is considered to be superficial (ibid:72) or even manipulative (ibid:80-82), while esoteric thought with its strong visionary element is 'real', because it never loses touch with the concrete world (ibid:23-37; Scaligero 1991).

The concept of monism implies that life and thought have the same source, and therefore the cognitive act does not only produce some type of an image of the existing reality, but is itself a part of reality. As such, thinking has a capacity to reveal the very essence of life: the process of thought is an immediate point of access into the essence of a living being or an existing physical object. Conforming with this idea, we are not at all supposed to move away from our object of examination as required by 'objective' scholarship. The goal for the esotericist is, on the contrary, to unite with his or her item of research, so that the thought is experienced as life (Scaligero 1993:19). Only when the investigator succeeds in bringing his or her own individualised consciousness in accordance with the being and the spirit of the object, can his or her mental activity achieve authenticity. In that sense, the cognitive act which connects to an object is needed for completing that object's true existence, for it unites the material and the intelligible component of reality.

Yet, it needs to be stressed, again, that despite the indispensability of cognition it is interpreted not as being imposed by the researcher's mind, but as inherent in the object and thus ultimately resulting from the latter. The human mind is considered only the mediator of sense and meaning, which

are immaterial aspects of a material object. In this way, the process of cognition does not only alter the object by completing it, but also changes the thinking person. Cognition is then seen as a cosmic process whereby the thinker is transmuted, surpassing his or her individual existence and participating in the wholeness.

Within the monistic setting, any single part of the Oneness can be comprehended only in its 'inter-relatedness' with all other components. As part of this understanding, the boundaries of individual objects are loosened, so that their character becomes imprecise, but more connected to the surroundings and, thereby, more 'holistic'. As a consequence, definitions are less sharp and less clear than in analytic thought, because every phenomenon is not only itself but is also related to the 'other', through and because of its permanent interaction with its environment. The main tool for an understanding of phenomena in this mode is the drawing of analogies, which will be explicated in detail below in the section "The Inclusive Strategies of Esoteric Epistemology". For now, it should simply be noted that according to esoteric epistemology, connections between phenomena and processes cannot be fully explained by sequences of cause and effect. Causality is seen primarily as a representation of a mechanistic model of the world.¹⁹ Patterns of cause and effect tend to distil 'things' or 'facts' out of a broader and far richer 'field' (cf Smuts 1996/1926:16-17) in which a phenomenon or incident occurs, and therefore such patterns do not suit the holistic worldview. Concentration on 'fields' instead of 'facts' means that questioning the 'how' of things is much more insightful and productive for esotericists than questioning the 'what' or the 'why'. Questioning the 'how' aims to make sense of the world,²⁰ while questioning the 'what' and the 'why' aspire only to definitions and analysis.

5. The Totality of Esoteric Knowledge

Before we proceed to a discussion of the methods and media of esoteric knowledge, we need to explore yet another aspect of it, which also results from esotericism's stress on Oneness and concertedness: the claim of totality. Corresponding to the esoteric perception of the world as ultimately One, there is in esotericism only one esoteric knowledge of this world encompassing everything within it. Therefore, esoteric knowledge is most comprehensive. Various versions, or systems, of esoteric knowledge exist, but they are 'related' to each other, and understood as expressing the same truth in different forms. Esoteric knowledge is primarily concerned with the totality in which a single phenomenon is embedded, and secondarily with the

single phenomenon directly in itself. However, it also needs to be mentioned that the process of acquiring knowledge often proceeds the opposite way round. That is to say, knowledge about the totality can actually be acquired by close observation and interpretation of a single phenomenon, because the phenomenon is part of an all-encompassing reference system, in which everything is in some way related to everything else.

Esoteric knowledge is usually laid out as an over-arching structure embracing both microcosm and macrocosm. The Tarot is a perfect example of this. Its 22 Major Arcana are generally interpreted as showing aspects of human experience, while the suit cards, or Minor Arcana, refer to cosmic forces and occurrences. As always, microcosm and macrocosm reflect the same conditions at different levels, therefore the differentiation between Major and Minor Arcana can only be provisional and is not overly important in practice. The human and the cosmic spheres are never entirely separated in esotericism, as natural phenomena are regularly conceived in terms of human experience, and conversely, human experience is frequently expressed with reference to symbolic cosmic events.

Another characteristic of esoteric knowledge is that it is osmotic in the sense that nothing is ever restricted to only one possible interpretation and meaning. Typically, several systems of knowledge overlap each other. As for the Tarot, the Major Arcana are often equated with primordial images or archetypes in the Jungian understanding. At the same time, the 22 images are classed with the esoteric meanings of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For the interpretation of the Minor Arcana, the symbolism of the four elements is prevalent, and is then combined with the connotations of the ten *sefirot*, the basic forces of creation according to Kabbalah. Moreover, the design of the cards, the ideas of which are often supposed to originate from ancient Egyptian priesthood (or even from Thoth-Hermes himself who revealed them to the priests), have been adjusted to all kinds of mythological systems. Beginning with the two influential sets by Pamela Coleman Smith (the Rider White Tarot) and Frieda Harris (the Crowley Tarot), there are numerous versions available which draw on Egyptian, Medieval, Renaissance or Surrealist art; or designs inspired by Celtic, Norse, Gypsy or Tibetan traditions; or by more or less recent ideas about witchcraft.

According to esoteric readings, each Tarot card relates to all other cards in the pack in some way, be it analogical, supplementary or contrasting. A single Tarot card cannot be fully understood as an isolated image and statement. Many view the Major Arcana as an ongoing succession of living

and knowing, but there are also stagnant stages (eg Major Arcanum VIII: Justice or Adjustment; Major Arcanum XII: the Hanged Man; and Major Arcanum XIV: Temperance or Art), backsliding stages (particularly Major Arcanum XVI: the Tower), and also various groupings of oppositions, complementarities, or mediating qualities within the system as a whole.

Such groupings are usually connected to belief in numerology. According to Oswald Wirth, for the Major Arcana alone there are significant groups of three, seven and five. The Minor Arcana are overtly divided into groupings of 15 (the number of cards employing one of the four elements); 10 (the number of the Kabbalistic *sefirot*); and 4 (the number of the elements – fire, water, air, earth; of the court-figures – Knight, Queen, Prince, Princess; and of the Kabbalistic worlds – Atsilut, Beri'ah, Yetsirah and Assiyyah). There are many more possibilities for numerological readings. The Tarot is used as a path of initiation and divination, or in other words, a way of gaining esoteric knowledge.

Although it is quite a risky undertaking, in the following I attempt to give an overview of the kind of knowledge that is embodied in the Tarot according to an esoteric interpretation. Countless books have been written from several perspectives on various versions of the Tarot. I have tried to extract the basic ideas ascribed to the card-systems, regardless of the specific imagery employed in different packs. In reading the Tarot, it is usual to begin by selecting a picture card, but in this paper I selectively summarise explanations from Tarot literature. It needs to be stressed in this context that reading the Tarot from the perspective of esoteric epistemology involves an exploration of symbols which are sometimes more, sometimes less complex. Grasping the content of symbols is, as will be explained in the next section of this paper, an act of intuition. A symbol can never be fully understood by secondary interpretation, even if such interpretation can lead the researcher one step further. Moreover, many of the Major Arcana point to mythical figures or themes, on which secondary materials are abundant. Thus, the following overview can be nothing but superficial. Its main function is to introduce the *topoi* of esoteric Tarot, before we can discuss any *topoi* of esoteric epistemology. The overview will also give an indication of the comprehensiveness of the knowledge contained in esoteric Tarot. A selection of significant images will be discussed below in some detail.

As already mentioned, the 22 Major Arcana of the Tarot are presumed to refer to specific situations and spiritual tasks for an individual. The sequence starts with the Magician, a man handling or preparing to handle a number of

tools, among them objects symbolising the four elements: a coin (earth), a cup (water), a stick (fire) and a sword (air). With this card, a human being is equipped to act according to his or her will. In Major Arcanum II, the Popess or High Priestess, re-connects the active consciousness of the Magician, who has begun to see himself as and to act as an individualised person, to the original Oneness. With her passive and receptive attitude, the High Priestess represents a contemplative awareness of the Divine reality.

Card III, the Empress, depicts a woman as a form-giving principle, through which the creative will can become manifest. She is followed by the Emperor, the accomplisher, who establishes social order and thereby guarantees stability in life. Another card in close proximity then interlocks this achieved order with the sphere of the Divine. Such is the task of the High Priest, a figure pointing to the intellectual and spiritual capacities of the human being. Still within the realm of the Emperor, those mental interests need structure. Therefore they display themselves in the form of dogma and ritual. The succession between the Emperor and the High Priest is not agreed – sometimes the Emperor is Major Arcanum IV and the High Priest is Major Arcanum V, sometimes *vice versa*.

With the next card a new row opens up, but with little agreement on the sequence of the cards. After Arcana I to V referring to stages of an individual in his or her relationship to or emancipation from the Divine, the Lovers (sometimes Major Arcanum VI) show a turn to another individual, and the possibility of initiation through love and sex. (The connection between knowledge and sex, an important theme in many ancient myths, cannot be discussed here, because it is too extensive. Firstly, it is not specific to esotericism, although it has been taken up in this line of tradition, whilst the Christian mainstream has always denied the possibility of spiritual growth through sexual contact.)

Another suggestion for Card VI in the sequence is the Charioteer. These images of a human being on a vehicle that is setting off are usually associated with self-control, enabling the individual to move successfully in the world. The kind of mastership achieved at this stage is so important that the following Major Arcanum, Adjustment, is exclusively concerned with retaining this control and extending it from a single moment to one's whole existence.

However, the next card again reveals the theme of a lonely search, of inward movement after the outward movement of the charioteer: the Hermit is

depicted with a lantern, surrounded by darkness. He is again countered by a symbol of control, of mastership: the Lady of the Animals, portrayed in a Major Arcanum either preceding or following the Hermit. The card is named Strength, or Lust, respectively, by Crowley, and numbered IX or XI.

After Strength, showing superiority over nature, the Hanged Man (Major Arcanum XII) symbolises surrender. Whether his hanging upside down is a wilful act of sacrifice, or a situation completely out of his control, is a matter of debate. The next Major Arcanum, Death, (XIII) is mostly interpreted as necessary and positive in its effect, not being a final state, but a presupposition of renewal.

Death needs to be followed by reorganisation, which is Temperance or Art, according to Crowley. The card (Major Arcanum XIV) has received differing interpretations, but it is generally agreed that the quality represented can only be achieved when active and passive elements are in balance. With regard to knowledge, Valentin Tomberg says that there is an active aspect of striving for information and wisdom, but that both can only be obtained, when in the right moment one behaves both passively and receptively (Anonymus 1983/1973:vol 2, 429).

The next two Major Arcana depict evil powers. In their external manifestation they are represented by the Devil (XV), and those internal to the human being are represented by the Tower (XVI). All remaining Major Arcana show cosmic symbols, but most interpreters agree that they refer to spiritual states of human beings in their interaction with cosmic (ie Divine) intelligence, and with the parallels of this interaction in natural processes.

The sequence begins with the Star (Major Arcanum XVII), standing for organic spiritual growth, by which a person is able to integrate idea and reality. In contrast to that theme, the Moon (Major Arcanum XVIII) symbolises captivity by illusion and intellectual regress. The Moon is the Arcanum of the reflected light of the sun. Thus, it functions as a metaphor for the repetition of an original and consequently the creation of an enchanting but misleading image of reality. Yet, despite its shining and illusionary effect, the Moon has always negative connotations of materiality. In some significant interpretations (including by Oswald Wirth and Valentin Tomberg), the image is applied to “passive intellect” and its material orientation, ie to an intellectuality lacking intuition. Intuition, a key term in esoteric epistemology, is the theme of the next Major Arcanum, the Sun

(XIX). In the next section, this card and its relationship to the Moon are discussed in more detail.

Our sequence then continues with Judgement or Aeon, according to Crowley (Major Arcanum XX). The motif here is renewal, as in Temperance, but this time in the sense of either resurrection (according to those interpretations that are closer to the Christian tradition) or enlightenment. Both senses of this renewal concern not an individual alone, but encompass the whole of the cosmos. Major Arcanum XXI is the Universe, seen as the dancing cosmos, fully aware of its own capacities. This awareness has been attained by spiritual work on consciousness, which was first represented in the Tarot by aspects of either a man or a woman, and then in different ways of connectedness to nature and cosmic processes.

The beginning and the end of the Major Arcana are bracketed together by the Fool on card 0. The Fool represents a kind of consciousness that is not yet or is no longer mindful of being an individual. He is a human being moving through the world as if in a dream.

While the Major Arcana are concerned with human development and human involvement with the world, the Minor Arcana show forces resulting from natural interactions. As such, they represent circumstances in the physical world, but also mental or emotional states of the human being.

The major structure of Minor Arcana is provided by the four symbols: coins (disks), cups, sticks and swords. In esoteric readings, they are understood as symbols of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air, respectively. In the intellectual history of the West, there is a long-standing tradition regarding the four elements as the matrix for interpreting all natural occurrences.²¹ There are ten numbered cards for each of the four element symbols, plus the four court cards with Knave, Knight, Queen and King (in the Crowley set: Princess, Prince, Queen and Knight). Esotericists connect all these Minor Arcana to their versions of Kabbalah, which is believed to be in some way (thus also historically) related to the teachings of Hermeticism: I to X of the numbered cards are presumed to correspond to the ten *sefirot*, the basic forces of the cosmic order constituting the Kabbalist Tree of Life. The meanings of the numbered cards result from a joint effect of the *sefirot* with the four elements. The court cards, on the other hand, are connected to the so-called Kabbalist realms, which describe the development from a creative will down to a material object. The first of these realms, *Atsilut* (Emanation), designates an unspecific idea expressing itself by the constitution of the ten

sefirot. At the next level, *Beri'ah* (Creation) the Divine light spreads through the *sefirot*. The next realm is *Yetsirah* (Formation), and brings forth a concrete concept. That concept then materialises in the realm of *Assiah* (Actualisation).

In the Tarot, *Atsilut* is represented by the King (Crowley: Knight), *Beri'ah* by the Queen, *Yetsirah* by the Knight (Crowley: Prince), and *Assiah* by the Knave (Crowley: Princess). Furthermore, the court figures are again linked to the four elements: the King (Crowley: Knight) to fire, the Queen to water, the Knight (Crowley: Prince) to air, and the Knave (Crowley: Princess) to earth. A general rule for all court cards is that they show where something is, while the numbered cards point rather to the effect of something.²²

It is unnecessary to introduce all 56 cards of the Minor Arcana. In order to demonstrate how interpretation works, only a model of the row of cups will be outlined – one of the four lines encompassing the four court cards and ten numbered cards, will briefly be examined. Cups represent the element water. Accordingly, the King (Crowley: Knight) of cups shows how water works in the realm of *Atsilut*, or fire. The King (Knight) of water therefore represents ‘the fiery realm of water’ and, as one would expect, such a construct allows for a wide spectrum of interpretations. With the ‘Queen of water’ matters somewhat are easier: she is the very essence of water. Everything else, however, depends on the symbolic meanings ascribed to water. Water is then represented in the realm of *Yetsirah*, the Knight (Crowley: Prince), where it takes on an airy quality, ie it becomes steam, again with a variety of possible interpretations. With the Knave at the earth-level (Crowley: Princess), water consolidates in the form of ice.

The ace cards are always classed with *Keter*, the first of the *sefirot*. The ace of water is interpreted as the origin of watery forces. Two cups represent the idea or the essential wisdom (*Hokhma*) of water. Three cups stand for *Binah* (the form-giving force) of water, which is often interpreted as the quality of abundance. In the picture of four cups, water meets with the *sefirah* *Hesed* (Love), which can be viewed as resulting in joy. With five cups, water works through *Gevurah* and gains a correcting, clarifying quality. Six cups, then, are interpreted as water in quiet balance. Seven cups reflect water in an emotional setting, which results in a lack of stability. Eight cups are seen as confronting water with the *sefirah* of structure or order, *Hod* (Splendour). The interpretation of this symbol depends on what ‘structured water’ can be. Nine cups are a ‘foundation of water’, and ten cups, finally, bring water to the original domain of the four elements. This is symbolised by the *sefirah*

Malkut (Kingdom), so that there is a collaboration of the four elements with a predominance of water.

It can be seen from this quick overview, that the Tarot invites all sorts of speculation. The consequence is an abundance of possible meanings, a trait of esotericism that will be further discussed below.

6. The Inclusive Strategies of Esoteric Epistemology

In the previous section, we saw how esoteric readings of the Tarot connect coins, cups, sticks and swords to the four elements and their numbers to the *sefirot* of Kabbalah. One way to understand such correspondences is to consider the signs (coins, cups, sticks and swords) as symbols. Symbols are the most suitable carriers of both figurative expression and intellectual (as well as spiritual) meaning. A symbol is characterised by being a visible sign for an invisible idea – in fact it is both phenomenon and idea at the same time – and thus by its capacity to bridge the epistemological gap between a material phenomenon and an immaterial meaning. In the words of Oswald Wirth, symbols are windows to the infinite (Wirth 1978:30). Originally, a symbol was meant to be a sign of recognition, which re-assembled two parts of a unity, eg two parts of a ring as a sign for re-uniting friends. As a compound, the symbol carried a meaning that was otherwise hidden.

Symbols are situated at an intersection of different levels of being: the external and the internal, the carnal and the intellectual, the particular and the general, the detectable and the undetectable, the intelligible and the incomprehensible, the revealed and the obscure. Being a link between those antitheses, the symbol itself participates in both. Thus, there is always a correlation between the symbol and the object or idea it represents, so that the signifier coincides with the significant.

Symbols cannot be fully apprehended through rationality, and it is questionable if they can really be fully understood at all. Their interpretation is difficult and usually diverse; multiple meanings and multiple connections between phenomena are possible, which can vary from one culture to another and not uncommonly from one individual to another. However, if not by rationality with its mainstream logical repertory, in what other way do symbols become accessible? Firstly, symbols have been explored and interpreted in the past, so there are traditions to draw on. Secondly, one can gain experience in dealing with symbols and thus become more familiar with them over years and decades. Thirdly, the most appropriate means to make sense of a symbol is an intuition, a kind of cognition which brings together

being and thinking, just as the symbol unites material appearance and immaterial message.

Symbols are the most obvious indicators of the esoteric tendency to use images rather than abstract language. In the Tarot, the symbolic language is particularly inescapable since images are used on the face of the cards. But esoteric texts, too, always employ symbols, metaphors, and parables. Esoteric knowledge has a strong visual aspect. Esotericists claim to 'have seen' what they know, and ideally they want other people to 'see' the truth of what they experienced. In other words, unlike contemporary 'objective knowledge' where logical argument is primary, in esotericism the 'visibility' of evidence is crucial.

In order to clarify this type of concept, it is necessary to go far back into the history of epistemology. The ancient philosophical schools distinguished two ways of thought and knowing: the noetic and the dianoetic. According to Plato, the Greek word *noein* indicates thinking as a recognition and awareness close to a sensual experience. As such, *noesis* is juxtaposed with *dianoia*, a discursive mode of thinking which obeys the rules of logic.²³ In Latin terminology, as it was coined by Cicero, *noesis* was called *intellectus* and *dianoia* was *ratio*. The distinction between these two ways of reasoning was still relevant for philosophers of the Middle Ages, but for reasons that are not clear, *intellectus* became the designation for the capacity of thinking and drawing conclusions logically, while *ratio* was used for understanding through a special kind of perception, namely seeing with the mind's eye.

The fact that there was an awareness of these two intelligences is important for clarifying that the notion of thinking is non-uniform. Everyday language and contemporary scholarship accept only the logical and discursive kind of knowledge; esotericists of all ages are inclined to the noetic variant. So-called objective knowledge is based on sensory perception, which is widely acknowledged to be 'empirical', and thought which contains speculative elements and, according to Kant, depends entirely on the way the human mind shapes reality. Esoteric epistemology does not draw a distinction between perception and thought. This is explicitly stated in the ninth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which postulates the coincidence of sensation and thought in the cognitive act (Copenhaver 1995:27). The Hermetic theory of cognition was composed of elements taken selectively from various ancient philosophies, in particular from Stoicism,²⁴ and reframed magical belief philosophically.

Contemporary revivals of magic in Neopagan and Wiccan circles emphasise the identity and interchangeability of a thing with its name, and this is exactly what the Hermetic treatise says, albeit more elaborately. In the later nineteenth century, the philosophical grounds of esotericism were at a disadvantage since the most prominent philosophers were not interested. But even though neither Eliphas Lévi's nor Helena Blavatsky's temperament was suited to epistemological considerations, they nevertheless drew on sources in which the Hermetic theory of cognition was already inherent.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who was appointed chairman of the German Section of the Theosophical Society in 1902, was far more openly concerned with epistemological problems than Blavatsky, and he was far more open about the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Pansophic tradition²⁵ and German Idealism on which he drew. While Blavatsky claimed to have gained her knowledge through the revelations of Tibetan Masters, Steiner believed everybody had the ability for esoteric insight by developing his or her own intellectual capacities. In this way, Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, renewed esoteric philosophy.

The epistemology that Steiner embraced was the outcome of his long-standing editorial work on Goethe's *Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften*; yet at the same time it was rooted in the tradition of German Idealism, a branch of Post-Hegelian thought closely linked to Romanticism. Anthroposophy, a term which became the name of one of the most influential esoteric movements of the twentieth century, was first used by Immanuel Hermann Fichte in the title of an extensive book (1856) about the nature of the human being. In the third part of this work, entitled "Soul and Intellect", Fichte stresses the importance of the "I" (*Ich*) in the evolution of the cosmos. The I is described as the unmistakable spiritual essence which integrates all other parts of physical and psychic existence and that finds expression only in humans. Within his or her I, each human being is connected to the divine, and thus each human being takes part in the process of creation.

According to Steiner's Anthroposophy, which continued the philosophical tradition initiated by Fichte, the I plays a crucial and active part in the operation of cognition. Steiner postulates four stages of higher realisation: The first consists only of the perceptible object itself; the second is the image of that object created by the human mind; the third is the concept of a thing or the process through which humans comprehend it; and the fourth stage is the final union of images and terms made possible by the I. The terms of language are taken by Anthroposophy as genuine components of a given

entity, and thus they are interpreted as the other necessary and constitutional half of perception. Only perception and term together make up the whole which can be called reality.

With this approach, Steiner also establishes a fresh link to the epistemology of Thomas Aquinas, in as much as Aquinas preceded him in interpreting “truth” as an adjustment of object (*res*) and intellect, which can only be attained through human consciousness. By making this kind of intellectual effort, humans can realise a divine quality as the unity of thing/object and intellect/spirit is already in God.²⁶

For esotericists, knowledge is not produced in the human mind by following logical and discursive rules, but is revealed by the divine and then perceived by those who are ready for it.²⁷ Revelation can take place in different ways. It can be transmitted by texts as in established religions. Although there is no esoteric canon, the notion of holy scripture is usually acknowledged. However, the emphasis is always on experience in esotericism. Consequently, direct experiences are generally more important than those mediated by ancient texts. Many New Age revelations come from spiritual beings and are written down by those who receive them.²⁸ Those to whom a divine source is not immediately accessible usually seek instructions from spiritual teachers – those with superior spiritual experience.

However, esotericists consider that knowledge may also be gained independently from close observation of nature and the whole of the cosmos. When we leave the absolute level of knowledge, the content of which is the unity and the ultimate identity of all beings and all occurrences of the physical world, we reach the relative level of differentiation between phenomena. On the grounds of the monistic doctrine that all appearances belong to the same Oneness, it is understood that the physical world reveals the spiritual. However, the essence of physical occurrences needs to be correctly conceived.

Just as discursive intelligence can only function correctly when it follows the principles of two-fold logic, noetic intelligence also obey rules. The first rule is that the mind has to be put into a receptive mode. The essence of a being or an object under examination can only reveal itself when the mind is open to it – when the mind is not particularly concerned with itself. Thus, the first exercise for anyone interested in spiritual knowledge is to observe the emergence and the fading of thoughts. Conceptual thought then dissolves

and the mind is put out of action. Paradoxically, esoteric mental activity first requires a passive state of mind.

In the Tarot, the balance between mental activity and passivity is illustrated by the Star, the seventeenth of the Major Arcana. The card shows a woman under the stars and by the sea, pouring liquid from two mixing jugs. It is generally agreed that the picture expresses human yearning for unity with the cosmos. Tomberg named the card the Arcanum of inspiration – the inspiration that follows an inner vocation, symbolised by the stars, to strive for wisdom. Frieda Harris' design stresses the cosmic aspect with a huge globe in the centre of the card. The two jugs are explained as representing intellectual and spiritual harmony. Intellectual striving for a connection with cosmic processes needs to be balanced by spiritual calm and by trust that the revelation of a truth will occur when the time is right.

Thus it is necessary to put the mind in a position so that it can meditate upon the object the researcher wants to know about. The mind is so astute that it can perceive the information provided by the object purely by its existence. This kind of intense mental orientation towards an object is often simply called observation. As far as I can see, this terminology comes from Rudolf Steiner's interpretation of Goethe's epistemology. Steiner employs the term "observation" (*Beobachtung*) to signify the way an object confronts an observer. The process triggered by this encounter is the second step in esoteric cognition. However, it appears to me that a more suitable term for what happens during this confrontation of object and observer is "contemplation". Derived from the Latin *contemplatio*, this term signifies a "thoughtful look", so that the notion embraces both looking at an object and thinking about it. Etymologically, from the Latin, *contemplatio* means the orientation of the gaze towards the area (*templum*) encompassed by the eye of the *augur*.²⁹ *Contemplatio* corresponds to the Greek *theoria*, a term employed by Herodotus and pre-Socratic philosophers which means "mental vision" and describes their methodology of research. The term contemplation also points to a closeness between the capacities of the eye as a physical organ and the intellect,³⁰ as does one of the possible meanings of vision according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: an experience of seeing something in the mind.³¹

The moment of realisation in the esoteric meaning is called intuition. It is the third and final step in esoteric cognition. Intuition comprises the revelation of an object or occurrence under observation and its reception by the mind. Both revelation and reception coincide at the moment of intuition. In order

to receive properly, the mind must produce a thought in the form of the observed object. In other words, intuition happens when the process of thought and the object of thought become identical. However, intuition is not a realisation of something as a separate item or development. The intuitive act grasps that item or development as part of a wholeness, which means that intuition apprehends something as conditioned by the whole or as a limitation of the whole. It is thus very important to stress the experiential aspect of intuition.

At the moment of intuition, a person experiences truth, which means that intuition can never be replaced by mere information or instruction. Moreover, the intuitive experience is not only about knowing a truth, but it is also a realisation of Oneness: the Oneness of a sensual object and an immaterial notion, and ultimately the Oneness of the thinking human being and the cosmos, united through the cognitive act. Someone who seeks esoteric truth can be led some way by words, but in order to be really persuaded he or she must seize and hold the truth firmly through the experience of intuition.³²

In his comprehensive study of philosophical intuition, Josef König (1926) found that this particular kind of immediate knowledge is significant in monistic approaches like those of Plotinus and Spinoza. In the philosophies of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and Friedrich W Schelling (1775-1854), the concept of intuition once more gained major importance as *intellektuale Anschauung* (intellectual vision). It is clear that intuition always accompanies speculative thought, which ideally results in a visionary mode of apprehension. Speculative thought never becomes abstract. It transcends sensory experience only insofar as it attempts to explain, to unify and to order experience, not for the purpose of forming abstract terms.

According to König's analyses of its philosophical applications, intuition is a penetration of the Oneness by the Oneness itself. This concords with the Latin etymology of the word – *intueri*, to look into something – so that we could say, intuition is the vision that the Absolute attains when it looks at and finally into itself. With the act of intuition, the thinking process coincides with the thought; the thinker unites with the object of his or her thought, and the Oneness formed in that coincidence concurs with the multiplicity of all the different factors involved in the act itself. This means that intuition always remains somewhat confused in the sense that boundaries are not sharply drawn and the components of the process melt into one another. Just as the Oneness is naturally undefined, intuition is not unmistakably

definable. The term describes an indefinite relationship which is self-enclosed. To enter this relationship from outside is impossible. For that reason, an etic approach to this epistemological problem does not make much sense. One can have intuition, but it is not feasible to understand its content completely from an outsider's point of view.

Yet, in the intuitive act there is indeed a specific element: by intuition, the mind grasps an identifiable item out of a fluid and indeterminate overall situation. This is what intuition is for and, why it can still be regarded as, a cognitive performance.

Rudolf Steiner, the most profound source of information on esoteric epistemology, explains intuition in his own style, but reaches the same conclusions outlined above. According to Steiner, the term "intuition" describes the way in which an individual consciousness confronts ideas and epithets.³³ Steiner can argue in this way, because he assumes that ideas and notions have a life of their own and do not exist only as products of the mind. In the process of thought, the mind grasps the content of a notion and brings it into accord firstly with its own flow and secondly with a corresponding perception. Distinguishing and then drawing the right connection between multiple perceptions, the contents of thoughts, and mental activities is the achievement of "intuitive thinking".

The nineteenth Major Arcanum of the Tarot can be interpreted as depicting the theme of intuition. It is called the Sun and shows a bright sun shining upon two children who appear to be twins. On Frieda Harris' card, the children have butterfly wings and are dancing joyfully. Crowley emphasises the possibility of the transformation and complete liberation of humankind through the sun's light – with the latter always, not only for Crowley, being a symbol of clear consciousness (Zajonk 1993).

In the Marseilles Tarot, Major Arcanum XIX shows the twins in an embrace, one drawing the other's neck towards himself, and the other touching his breast close to the position of his heart. Tomberg interprets the image as a unification of intellect and spontaneous wisdom, which he calls "intuition" (Anonymus 1983/1973:vol 2, p576). The way to intuition according to Tomberg is to raise the intellect, so that it can (re-)unite with its transcendental aspect. Tomberg's approach is different from Steiner's in the sense that he does not exclude analytical intelligence, but aims to integrate its results into a "creative intuition", a concept for which he draws on the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1951). With this kind of intuition, the

emphasis is on envisioning a synthesis of all findings of the rational intellect, and this envisioning, again, is not reasoning in the usual sense, but it is an experience. According to Bergson, and to Tomberg who follows his ideas, life can only be understood by this kind of experience, never by the rational intellect alone.

Another important method in esoteric epistemology is the drawing of analogies. Unlike intuitions, analogies are not so much instruments of genuine insight into phenomena, but rather a means to order and structure the world. Analogies are also based on monism, insofar as the monistic concept entails a genuine sympathy between the forces and phenomena of the universe. In order to explore patterns of organisation within the Oneness and to classify its numerous components, forces and phenomena are compared to each other and similarities are recorded. In this way, a network of inter-relations emerges, embracing cosmic, psychological, mental and spiritual dimensions and connecting them to each other. The main point of effort in this kind of esoteric cognition is again not demarcation, and thus the sharpness of definition, but the acknowledgement of resemblances. Resemblances are detected by the (presumed) common effects of the phenomena, by the sympathy between them. Thus, esoteric epistemology follows a paratactic logic, the means of which is mainly analogy.

Phenomena are neither identical nor are they diverse; rather, they are analogical, which is a specific way of being similar (Anonymus 1983/1973: vol 1, p12). Drawing analogies emphasises the inter-relatedness within the Oneness: all phenomena and occurrences are classified into correspondence lines, categorised according to analogies between them.

The kind of worldview that arises from this method has been called a “vertical worldview” (Klein & Dahlke 1986). Vertical thinking is to be distinguished from horizontal thinking insofar as it does not only follow the concept of a hierarchy of order, in the way in which we, for example, classify lions, lizards, frogs, deer, doves, wolves, eagles and owls as “animals”. Additionally, there is a limited number of original principles or basic qualities, which can then be detected in a number of phenomena across the classes of the horizontal order. The original principles are “unities, in which the multiplicity of phenomena is composed through various permutations” (Dethlefsen 1987:92), and they are employed to categorise phenomena. In recent times, the concept of original principles has been revived by the biologist Rupert Sheldrake (1984), who as a “hypothesis of formative

causation” assumes the existence of non-material principles of forms that shape the outward appearance as well as the behaviour of living beings.

The notion of vertical order can be illustrated as follows: different species of animals represent different original principles and correspond to phenomena of other classes. Analogies are meant to express communal effects. For example, we can look at correspondences between animals and planets: the lion as well as the lizard are classed with the sun, which means sun-like qualities are ascribed to both animals; in the same way the frog is classed with the moon, the deer (*cervus fugitivus*) with Mercury, the dove with Venus, the wolf with Mars, the eagle with Jupiter, and the owl and other night birds with Saturn. The same can be done with other horizontal categories, such as plants, minerals, parts of the body, diseases, landscapes, colours, professions, and so on. A network of references is established, in which the appearance of one phenomenon points to a number of other phenomena of the same vertical category. The best-known system of this kind is astrology, which connects star signs and planetary constellations at the time of someone’s birth to his or her character and future fate. Not only do the planets themselves and their constellations represent themselves, but their very existence and ever-changing forms of occurrence have wider implications that contain meanings beyond their physical forms.

In congruence with the laws of analogy, the Tarot is an analogy to the cosmos (Leuenberger 1986:96). This is the reason why the cards mirror and clarify cosmic as well as personal situations. The personal level is easy to integrate when one follows the rule of the individual being a microcosm. If complex problems occur, so that one card would not be enough to reflect it, specialists suggest systems for laying out a number of cards in certain orders, which can then represent various factors or persons in the constellations of life.

7. Being and Meaning

One of the main traits of esoteric thought is belief in the meaningfulness of the world as it is. Esotericism can provide someone willing to accept its holistic approach with an overwhelming abundance of meanings. It does not draw on a fixed corpus of texts that are meaningful in an intellectual as well as religious sense, but rather on the whole of existence, that is, on simply every occurrence of and in life. As the process of gaining intuition draws together the physical appearance of the object and its spiritual meaning, esoteric meaningfulness is not only an experience of thought, but an experience of life.

Meaning emerges from the possibility of incorporating human experiences into an over-all context, and esotericism has the epistemological tools to do exactly that. The Major Arcana of the Tarot provide a vivid example of how various mental and emotional stages, with positive and negative connotations, are interpreted as enriching the human experience and leading a person towards higher spiritual development.

In accordance with such a view, there is for the esotericist no such thing as pure chance – every incident is loaded with meaning. One could say that esotericists apply methods of fortune-telling to life as a whole. Not only the lines in any given person's hand or the card that someone picks up from a pile, are made into symbols for and representations of a person's inner condition and future fate, but every situation, occurrence and encounter are meaningful. Whatever shows up within the universe and occurs in human life has meaning for the esotericist and will lead to something good in the end. Esotericism is thus set apart from mainstream trends in more recent Western thought which operate on a 'part of the whole' basis.

Such mechanistic thought can derive ultimate meaning only from in an incomprehensible transcendent principle. For example, Biblical revelation in its orthodox interpretations draws meaning from a personalised God as a transcendent force, not from nature, and the senselessness of the world has been bewailed particularly by *Qohelet* in the Old Testament. Even earlier, the Greek poets of the seventh century BCE perceived themselves and their individual wishes as opposed to the course of events.

In the history of systematic thought in the West, there are three important features that led to the loss of meaning: bi-valent logic, according to which a phenomenon is identical only with itself and is separate from other phenomena; the devaluation of the material realm of existence against the spiritual as a consequence of Platonic philosophy; and the Kantian limitation of human cognitive faculty to the categories of space and time. All these features are opposed in esotericism. Firstly, esotericists operate with a multi-valent logic, characteristic of symbolic and analogical thinking. Secondly, esotericists usually distinguish between the material and the spiritual, but the two remain closely connected and influence each other not only from the spiritual to the material, but also *vice versa*. Moreover, esotericists consider that all spiritual things imprint themselves as signatures (a term first used in this way by Paracelsus) in the 'book of nature', and that everything material has a spiritual meaning. Thirdly, from the esoteric perspective, the human cognitive faculty is generally considered to be unlimited, although how

‘open’ this faculty is in any given individual depends entirely on their stage of intellectual and spiritual development.

Abstract forms of thinking that emerged particularly during modernity can well be seen as later outcomes of these three trends in the western history of ideas, since they ultimately operate on a separation of phenomena from their meanings. Conversely, esotericists find a comprehensive meaningfulness within and throughout the world.

Following the principles of esoteric epistemology, meaning is inherent in every phenomenon: the phenomenon functions as its own symboliser. Accordingly, meaning is viewed as inherent in conceivable ‘facts’, rather than as an external supplement to these facts. This corresponds to the belief of esotericists that matter and mind (consciousness) are not totally different or even fundamentally opposed. On the contrary, both are interpreted as different stages in the historical development of an original Oneness.

In all of this, it has to be stressed, that esoteric sense-making by means of monistic interpretation is highly flexible. Unlike objective knowledge, it is very dependent on cultural differences and varying symbolic connotations. Consider an example from animal symbolism once more: monkeys are venerated as anti-demonic fighters in India, while in ancient Greece and in Christian culture they represent human imperfection and even the devil. Moreover, the meaning of a phenomenon can never be determined just by itself, but only in accordance with the context of its actual appearance. The lion, for example, is generally regarded as a symbol of light and as a metaphysical Good throughout the ancient Near East. However, if it is shown in a context of battle between Good and Evil, it often changes sides and represents Evil and death.

Furthermore, since meaning in esotericism is always connected to being, knowledge is intimately tied to the person who has found it and who (re)presents it. Esoteric knowledge is always the knowledge of a particular person in a particular setting and in a particular situation of his or her life; thus it cannot be and is not even supposed to be universally valid.

8. The Haziness of Esoteric Knowledge

There is yet another limitation to meaningfulness in esotericism, which is set by the esoteric inclination toward the mysterious. Superficially, such a limitation sounds like the discussion above of the acquisition of total

knowledge. However, as has been stressed throughout this paper, there are various notions of knowledge.

It was stated previously that revelation and its perception are essentials of esoteric epistemology. Yet, esotericism is a clandestine religion and for an esotericist, revelation is – to use a term suggested by Aleida and Jan Assmann – “veiled”. The veil provides a typical metaphor for the dialectical tension between mystery and revelation. Full disclosure of divine reality can only be realised at a transcendent level. At the level of immanence, however, the Divine reveals and simultaneously conceals itself (Assmann & Assmann 1998:11; cf Jongen 1998:219).

Esoteric knowledge aims at an understanding and interpretation of natural phenomena and life as a whole, which is different from analysis and explanation. To unravel the universe completely is considered impossible and of no purpose for an esotericist, because the meaningfulness of the divine cosmos is generally inexhaustible. The esoteric approach to the cosmos is devotional rather than curious. Esotericists have been aware of this difference and consciously set apart their veiled knowledge from scientific curiosity at a very early stage. The hermetic treatise *Kore kosmou* contains a passage about the creation of humankind. One of the gods is opposed to the creation plan, because he foresees the human’s obtrusive approach to “the beautiful secrets of nature.” This god condemns humans to pull out plants in order to examine them, to cut up animals and even their own kind in order to look inside the bodies, and even to search for what is hidden in the most inaccessible holy places of the sanctuaries (Holzhausen 1997:400-446).

A negative connotation to the merely analytic intellect is also given with the Tarot card the Moon, the eighteenth Major Arcanum. Analytic intelligence only reflects light from another source, just as the moon reflects the light of the sun. Tomberg interprets this card as a representation of causal thinking, which always moves backwards, from effect to cause. This kind of intellectual activity can only inspect a phenomenon from the viewpoint of repetition, the rigid and thus deprived reproduction of something already given. The Moon card is the negative counterpart of the Sun, the symbol of intuition (Anonymus 1983/1973: vol 2, p540-1).

Another interesting reference to the theme of intuition and technical analysis, the two intellectual approaches, is the sequence of Major Arcanum I, the Magician, and Major Arcanum II, the High Priestess or, in the more traditional card sets, the Popess. The Magician is the one who goes about the

world with his magical tools to fulfil his own will. His approach is countered by the following card, which shows a female figure looking inward. Frieda Harris depicts this female figure with the attributes of the Egyptian Goddess Hathor, holding a veil. Her appearance and attitude can be interpreted as a reflection of the active awareness of the Magician. The High Priestess reconnects the Magician's individualising consciousness to its origin, to the primal Oneness. At the same time, the High Priestess covers this primal Oneness with her veil.

The image of the High Priestess provides a symbol for the final cause behind the overwhelming meaningfulness of the holistic worldview, which is ultimate darkness or nothingness; some call it, more metaphorically, "the abyss." The esoteric myth is grounded in the ultimate concealment of a non-figurative godhead that can be circumscribed only through negative terms. Whether the esoteric goddess or god is shrouded in mystery or simply non-existent remains a matter of choice for the believer – a choice between esoteric meaning or meaninglessness.

9. Esotericism as a Repository of Alternative Knowledge

I have explored in this paper the treatment of knowledge and its transference into meaning in esotericism. One could say that in esotericism meaning trumps knowledge, but this would make sense only if an 'objective' form of knowledge were demanded by esotericists.

Esoteric epistemology deals with a central problem of all epistemologies: the relation between sensory perception and thinking.³⁴ Esotericism solves this problem in the doctrine of Oneness (monism), by stating that perception and thought coincide within the intuitive act. Esotericists cut down the notion of thought to something that quite simply receives tokens (objects/occurrences and terms) and connects them in an appropriate way. Since the Oneness is a well-ordered cosmos, the human mind only needs to grasp this order. Anthroposophists claim that their mode of cognition is non-preconditioned and thus particularly authentic (Witzenmann 1986). According to Rudolf Steiner, an object/occurrence and its name are always originally one, the separation between the two resulting only from the first step of cognition (Steiner 1967/1886:62ff). The unification of object/occurrence and name then reinstates the original condition. This process is "living thought" and purposely lacks abstraction – Anthroposophist Georg Kühlewind terms it a "pre-dialectical" way of thinking (Kühlewind 1985:161).

The esoteric mode of perception is always based on empathy and is thus non-objective. Esoteric thought is non-critical (unless it deals with ideological opponents), which distinguishes it from contemporary academic reasoning. In recompense, esotericism aims at a total understanding of the world, whereas non-understanding is a central category of modernity.

The apparent attractiveness of the esoteric way of dealing with knowledge for many people since the 1980s has wider implications. It challenges a mainstream and, in particular, an academic tradition according to which knowledge needs to suffice only unto itself and its strictly-defined methodological requirements. In other words, knowledge is for non-esotericists an end, the only end and exists independently of any notion of the self. Some postmodern thinkers, Michel Foucault and François Lyotard in particular, have sought to prove that such thinking is illusory at best.

Esotericism comes close to those theories of knowledge that seek to overcome the gap that was opened early in modernity between the empirical world and the intellect. As Michel Foucault has shown in *The Order of Things* (1966) (his original title *Les Mots et les Choses* [*Words and Things*] is more appropriate), the modern model of a detached human mind ordering and classifying the empirical world replaced an earlier model, which assumed a genuine resemblance between significant (object) and signifier (term).

Esotericists willingly shape and employ knowledge in the service of their worldview. It is likely that everyone does this all the time; the crucial point for a sensible discussion is to be aware of the process.

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Notes

¹ Esotericism's dependency on secularism is also the major theme of Hanegraaff (1996), in particular ch15, pp411-513.

² Hammer assumes (2001:XV) that hermeneutics can only be emic, but this is contrary to the aim of hermeneutics to build bridges between different worldviews in order to make communication and discourse possible. Hammer shows a striking unfamiliarity with twentieth century hermeneutics – for example, instead of referring to Gadamer and Jean Grondin, he mentions Mircea Eliade as a representative of a hermeneutic approach. Hammer's confrontation of the hermeneutical and the historical is not to the point, since fertilisation of discussion rather than repetition of tradition for its own sake is the main concern of modern philosophical hermeneutics.

³ This is reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1994/1953) notion of language games.

⁴ Extensive information on the history of the Tarot can be found in Dummett (1980). There are numerous legends about people who knew and used the Tarot before the end of the fifteenth century, but there is no historical evidence for a card set before this time.

⁵ I am using the German edition.

⁶ Again, I am using a German edition.

⁷ There are various traditions on the identity of Hermes Trismegistos – see Faivre (1995).

⁸ Latin Asclepius §24 (Copenhaver 1995:81).

⁹ Hence one interpretation of the apocalypse in Asclepius §24, which says that the gods will leave the Egyptian land and return to heaven.

¹⁰ Latin Asclepius §13 (Copenhaver 1995:74).

¹¹ On pious versus curious knowledge, see Section 8, below.

¹² Huntington's works are strikingly uninformed about the inner diversity of the cultures treated.

¹³ On the transmission of Hermetic ideas during the Middle Ages, see Löw (2002).

¹⁴ Such an argument has been put forward by Faivre (1995:157), and particularly with Wouter Hanegraaff's influential monograph (1996).

¹⁵ For example, throughout the chapters on anthropogenesis in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* (1999); Anthroposophists reject Darwinism to the present day. Edgar Dacqué's (1878-1945) works are also particularly interesting for alternative views on the history of the earth and the evolution of species.

¹⁶ Quoting Petrarch's poem, *I Trionfi*.

¹⁷ See Dummett (1980:105-7).

¹⁸ This aspect is rightfully stressed by Liedtke (1996:57).

¹⁹ Cf Fritjof Capra on causality (1986:89).

²⁰ Cf also Liedtke (1996:73, 88), on the significance of *dunamis* (ie the dynamic rather than the static nature of the cosmos) in Hermeticism; and on the general Hermetic emphasis on the effects rather than the essence and existence of the Divine.

²¹ For the four elements as a matrix or tableau, see Böhme & Böhme (2004/1996:92).

²² According to Leuenberger (1984:305).

²³ For a detailed history of the terms, see Schadewald (1978:164ff).

²⁴ A Stoic parallel to the identity of perception and thought in Hermeticism can be found in Arnim (1903: vol II, p29, no 88). However, in Stoicism there is the concept of imagination as a connecting link between perception and thought. Through imagination, perception impresses itself upon the soul and can then be taken up by thought. Related ideas about the unity of perception and thought are also detectable in various works by Philo, for example in *Allegorical Interpretation (legum allegoriae)* I, 29 and III, 57.

²⁵ A branch of natural philosophy in seventeenth century Germany which took on the ideas of Paracelsus and the Rosicrucians.

²⁶ *Summa Theologia*, Chapter 16. See Dietz (1988:148ff).

²⁷ On esoteric knowledge as revealed knowledge, see Jongen (1998:78).

²⁸ Examples are numerous. Very famous are the revelations of Seth received by Jane Roberts. Several members of the Findhorn Community, including Eileen Caddy, Dorothy MacLean and David Spangler, received revelations which helped them to establish the community and informed them about the wider implications of what they were doing.

²⁹ In the ancient world, the *augur* interpreted the will of the gods. Evidence for the use of *contemplatio* in the way described can be found in the works of Cicero, Celsus, Quintilian and Aulus Gellius.

³⁰ A short cultural history of this connection is provided by Schipperges (1978).

³¹ The linguistic roots for *templum* in *contemplation*, and for 'vision' can be traced in Pokorny (2005:vol I, p1064 & p1125).

³² *Corpus Hermeticum* IX (Copenhaver 1995:29).

³³ Witzenmann (1992:76), citing Steiner's *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung* and *Philosophie der Freiheit*.

³⁴ This problem is charted through the history of epistemology in Hönigswald (1966).