THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF WESTERN MYSTICISM AND ESOTERICISM

Mysticism and esotericism are two intimately related strands of the Western tradition. Despite their close connections, however, scholars tend to treat them separately. Whereas the study of Western mysticism enjoys a long and established history, Western esotericism is a young field. *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* examines both of these traditions together. The volume demonstrates that the roots of esotericism almost always lead back to mystical traditions, while the work of mystics was bound up with esoteric or occult preoccupations. It also shows why mysticism and esotericism must be examined together if either is to be understood fully. Including contributions by leading scholars, this volume features essays on such topics as alchemy, astrology, magic, Neoplatonism, Kabbalism, Renaissance Hermetism, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, number symbolism, Christian theosophy, spiritualism, and much more. This handbook serves as both a capstone of contemporary scholarship and a cornerstone of future research.

Glenn Alexander Magee is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University. He is the author of *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (2001) and *The Hegel Dictionary* (2011), as well as many articles on German philosophy and its connections with mysticism and esotericism.

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Edited by

GLENN ALEXANDER MAGEE

Long Island University

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To Michael Murphy

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The idea for this volume grew out of discussions over meals at a week-long academic conference on Western esotericism, held at the Esalen Institute in May 2007. I would therefore like to thank, first of all, conference organizers Jeffrey J. Kripal and Wouter J. Hanegraaff – particularly the latter. It was in conversation with Professor Hanegraaff that I originally floated the idea of proposing a volume on Western esotericism to Cambridge. He encouraged me to do so, but the scope of the volume was later widened to include mysticism as well. Thus, what began as a proposal for a modest collection of about a dozen or so essays grew into the large volume that you now hold in your hands.

Everything that happens at Esalen is due, directly or indirectly, to the generosity and inspiring influence of its "innkeeper," Michael Murphy. Without Mike, there would have been no conference, no conversations, and no book. Thus, I dedicate this volume to him.

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G.A.M.
New York City
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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

1 A New Approach to the Hidden Intellectual History of the West

This handbook brings together articles on two subjects: Western mysticism and Western esotericism. These two areas are distinct, yet they are related so intimately that treating them together is not only possible but ultimately necessary if either is to be truly understood.

Mysticism in the West has tended to arise (as it has elsewhere in the world) within the context of a religious tradition, generally as a kind of deeper reflection on the inner meaning of the religion. This is obviously the case with Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism. However, the origins of Western mysticism go back much further, to pagan polytheism in fact, and the mystery religions of Ancient Greece.

Scholarship on Western mysticism enjoys a long, established history and is almost as old as scholarship on the religions from which mysticism typically springs. The same is not true, however, for scholarship on Western esotericism. It is, in fact, a very young field. Defining "esotericism" is a difficult task, and one fraught with controversy. However, we may begin simply by noting that this is the word increasingly used today to designate currents of thought formerly referred to as "occultism" or as "the occult sciences" (terms that came into wide usage in the nineteenth century). These currents have a long history in the West, sometimes hidden and subterranean (as the word "occultism" implies) – at other times, in the Renaissance for example, as part of mainstream thought. Esoteric doctrines, schools, or practices include alchemy, astrology, magic, Kabbalism, Renaissance Hermetism, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, number symbolism, sacred geometry, Christian theosophy, spiritualism, mesmerism, and much else.[1]

[1] The terms "esotericism" and "esoteric writing" are also used by academics to refer to the practice of secrecy, of hiding one's meaning or intention behind an "exoteric" veneer. Here

The ideas and movements just mentioned are familiar, in one way or another, to most people. We know that they exercised a great influence in the past (and still do). We have encountered traces of them in literature, film, and fairy tales. They peek through the cracks of standard histories of philosophy, science, and literature when, for example, it is mentioned in passing that Renaissance art and science were influenced by hermetic and kabbalistic teachings; that Goethe was an alchemist, and Newton an astrologer; that Kant and Strindberg read Swedenborg, and Schelling was a spiritualist; that Blake and Hegel were influenced by Jacob Boehme; that W. B. Yeats was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; and so on. These facts are mentioned, though not emphasized. They are seldom denied, but they are more or less avoided by most scholars. This began to change only recently.

In the 1930s, Paul Otto Kristeller became one of the first modern scholars to claim that the study of hermetic and esoteric literature was crucial for an understanding of the Renaissance. However, it was not until the publication of Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* in 1964 that the academic study of esotericism really took off. Yates went on to write several other ground-breaking books, including *The Art of Memory, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, and *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. Her work, in effect, spawned an entirely new discipline.

In 1965, an academic chair for the study of Western esotericism was established at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne) in Paris (currently held by Jean-Pierre Brach, and formerly by François Secret and Antoine Faivre). In 1999, a similar chair was established at the University of Amsterdam (currently held by Wouter J. Hanegraaff), where it is attached to a small department featuring several other specialists in esotericism and offering undergraduate and graduate-level degrees (see www.amsterdamhermetica.nl).[2] The European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (www.esswe.org) held its first conference in July 2007, a major event, hosted

"esoteric" refers simply to "hidden doctrines" of any sort, including ones that are skeptical, atheistic, and materialistic. Leo Strauss and his school are famous for using the term "esoteric" in this manner. As should be obvious, the denotation of the word in this volume is quite different – though the two usages are related. For Strauss's views, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

[2] In 2005, the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom became the world's third institution of higher learning to create a chair in esotericism. The position was held by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, who served as director of the Centre for the Study of Esotericism (EXESESO) within the College of Humanities at Exeter. However, following Goodrick-Clarke's untimely death in 2012, the university decided to close EXESESO.

by the University of Tübingen. Since 2001, the society has published a peer-reviewed journal, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*.

In the United States, the Association for the Study of Esotericism (www.aseweb.org) was founded in 2002 by Arthur Versluis of Michigan State University, and has held biennial conferences. It publishes a web-based journal, *Esoterica*. There are now a number of scholars of esotericism teaching at American universities, many of them in religious studies departments. For many years now the meetings of the American Academy of Religion have included sessions on Western esotericism, beginning with the "Esotericism and Perennialism Group" in the mid-1980s. This group was an offshoot of the Hermetic Academy, an organization founded in 1980 by Robert A. McDermott, President Emeritus of the California Institute for Integral Studies.

The present volume includes contributions by many of today's leading scholars of Western esotericism, bringing them together with a number of prolific and talented scholars working in the area of Western mysticism. Treating these two fields together makes this *Handbook* unique. As we shall see, an understanding of the roots of esoteric currents almost always leads us back to the mystical traditions. Further, the work of many of the mystics was bound up with what today would be called esoteric or occult preoccupations.

Two things should be clear from what has been said thus far. First, these are fascinating subjects. Second, they constitute, in effect, the hidden intellectual history of the West, running like a dark thread through the fabric of the more conventional intellectual history we have all been taught. The influence of mystics and esotericists on science, philosophy, theology, literature, politics, and popular culture is immense, but it is a story scholars are only just beginning to tell. This volume constitutes a kind of *summa* of the present state of research.

However, the foregoing more or less presupposes that we know what the terms "mysticism" and "esotericism" mean. But how are we to define them, and to distinguish between them? And should we even attempt to? After all, on a certain understanding, these terms can be seen as virtually synonymous. The mystical has always been "hidden" – if only in the sense that it is difficult for most to access. The term "mysticism" itself is derived from the Greek adjective *mystikos*, meaning "pertaining to the mysteries (*ta mysteria*)," or the secret rites of Eleusis. This word ultimately derives from the Indo-European root *mu-*, meaning "to be silent." Yet, while everything that is mystical may be hidden (in the sense just mentioned), not everything that is hidden is mystical.

Gershom Scholem attempted to distinguish between the mystical and the esoteric as follows:

> Mysticism means a kind of knowledge which is by its very nature incommunicable. It cannot be directly transmitted; it can be made visible only indirectly, because its substance cannot be expressed in human language. Esoteric knowledge, on the other hand, means a kind of knowledge that may be communicable and might be communicated but whose communication is forbidden.[3]

But Scholem is using "esoteric knowledge" in a much narrower sense than is employed in this volume, and in the academic field of Western esotericism. As the reader will see, much of what currently falls under this rubric is not and never was "secret" or "forbidden," nor was it the property of an elite. To take merely one example, spiritualism was a populist movement with an egalitarian ethos, whose proponents were anything but secretive (see the essay by Cathy Gutierrez in the present volume).

Nevertheless, Scholem's understanding of mysticism is fundamentally correct and can be used as means not just to distinguish mysticism from esotericism (as the term is used by the authors herein) but also to discern how they are related.

2 The Nature of Mysticism

The essence of mysticism is to be found in the concept of *gnosis* (about which Wouter Hanegraaff has contributed an entire essay in this volume). *Gnosis* is precisely what was supposed to have been acquired by those who participated in *ta mysteria*: a direct perception of the ultimate truth of what is. This knowledge was life transforming and impossible to adequately express in words. If we examine all that is typically categorized as "mystical," we find that in one way or another it alludes to such an experience, or flows from the standpoint of one who has had it, and attempts to help others to be receptive to the same.[4] (It is, therefore, highly appropriate that the first essay in this

[3] Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Mysticism in the Middle Ages, The 1964 Allan Bronfman Lecture* (New York: Judaica Press, 1964), 3–4.

[4] A great many definitions of mysticism have been offered by scholars – too many to cite here. I recommend readers consult Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Vol. 1: *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), xv–xx. In many ways, William James's discussion of mysticism in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) remains unsurpassed (see Lectures XVI and XVII in any unabridged edition).

volume, written by Charles Stein, introduces readers to what we know of the mystery rites of Eleusis.)

To be sure, there are significant differences between the mysticisms of Parmenides, Plato, Plotinus,[5] Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, the Kabbalists, the Sufis, the Rhineland mystics (Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, etc.), and Christian theosophists such as Jacob Boehme – all of whom are discussed in this collection. Still greater differences are to be found between all the above and what those of us in the West call "Eastern mysticism": Vedanta, Shaivism, Tantra, Taoism, Zen, and so on. Nonetheless, there is an identity underlying these differences – a reason all of them have a "family resemblance" for us and lead us to group them under a single term, however inadequate that term may be.

All of the mystics – East and West – are concerned with knowledge of the transcendent source of all being, the object of *gnosis*. Since everything in our experience flows from this source, or owes its existence to it, the source itself cannot be understood in terms of the categories we employ in thinking or speaking about finite things. The doctrine that the source is "beyond the opposites" or that within it all conceptual oppositions meet or are left behind (the *coincidentia oppositorum*) is nearly universal to what we call mysticism. It follows that, according to mysticism's peculiar logic, the transcendent source transcends the distinction between transcendence and immanence. Further, if the being of all is to be found in a One that is beyond every duality, then in spite of appearances all really is one.

Thus, mysticism typically teaches that all finite things are connected; all are parts or aspects of a cosmic order – call it the *Tao*, the *Logos*, the Absolute, or what have you. We might also call it an "infinite whole," meaning a whole or One that is not limited by anything external to itself, thus making it simultaneously the most indeterminate being (since nothing determines it) and the most determinate one (since it is *the* One, subsuming all determinations). Usually, the mystics also hold that there is a fundamental identity between ourselves and the One. This doctrine is perhaps most starkly laid out in Vedanta, in the identity between *Atman* (one's true self or nature) and *Brahman* (the transcendent source of all being) – but the same teaching is to be found in Eckhart. Indeed, it is a perennial teaching and is often expressed as the identity of the macrocosm and the microcosm. Further, if the One/All is identical to the impersonal and universal soul of which each of us is a finite

[5] The first three figures listed here are commonly referred to as philosophers, and modern historians of philosophy would like to believe that there is a sharp distinction between mysticism and philosophy. The present volume – especially the essays dealing with these three figures – makes it clear that matters are not so simple.

inflection, then it would seem to follow that the being of all things is soul-like, or ensouled.

Now, the preceding is an attempt to describe what is typically taught by the mystics – with the usual caveat that there are countless variations and differences of emphasis. But it is crucially important to understand that when the mystics tell us these things, they are attempting to put into words the "information" conveyed wordlessly in the experience of *gnosis*. No such account can ever be fully adequate – yet the most brilliant writers and teachers among the mystics can give us a vivid glimpse. The typical mystical experience (the experience of *gnosis*) seems to involve several basic components. These include: a fundamental alteration in the *quality* of experience, as things seem to become more vivid or real; the sense that one is seeing into the true nature of things; the intuition that all is really one; the sense that the distinction between self and other has collapsed; and the overwhelming feeling of the *rightness* of things – that everything, just as it is, is fundamentally right. All of this is experienced at once, and in a form that is quite distinct from both thinking (in the sense of reasoning) and mundane sense experience. It is obvious how the doctrines of mysticism summarized earlier are an attempt to put the wordless into words; to convey in the form of communicable teachings, as far as possible, what is revealed in *gnosis*. (A classic, and highly personal, account of this attempt to render the "content" of *gnosis* in words is to be found in the writings of Jacob Boehme; see the essay on him in this volume.)

The foregoing account of the nature of mysticism should make it clear why it is necessary to distinguish it from esotericism. For what, after all, do astrology, magic, alchemy, and spirit-seeing have to do with what I have just discussed? Actually, as will slowly emerge, they have a great deal to do with mysticism. And yet they are distinct from it at the same time; esotericism is not mysticism. So what is it?

3 Approaches to Understanding Esotericism

Our first impulse is to try to identify what esoteric currents all have in common; to identify their essential characteristics. But when we speak of esotericism, we are speaking of a category that subsumes quite a lot of very different things. What can the four esoteric "sciences" just named – astrology, magic, alchemy, and spirit-seeing – all have in common? To say the least, it is not obvious. And so it has recently been suggested that instead of searching for the essential characteristics of esotericism, we should understand it instead through the history of how this catchall category was

"constructed." This is the approach taken by Wouter Hanegraaff in his important book *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*.

For Hanegraaff, the story of esotericism's construction begins in the Renaissance, when Florentine humanists argued for a fanciful "genealogy of wisdom" in which figures such as Plato, Plotinus, and Hermes Trismegistus were all seen as transmitting an ancient wisdom whose source, ultimately, was divine. This hugely influential "ancient wisdom narrative," as Hanegraaff refers to it, was in effect the first modern attempt at a history of philosophy. In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, Protestant German theologians went on the attack against the ancient wisdom narrative. Their aim was to "'purify' Christian theology from its contamination by pagan error."[6] Thus, they jettisoned the "Platonic orientalism" of late antiquity, Hermetism, Gnosticism, Kabbalism, theosophy, alchemy, and generally anything that seemed to somehow conflict with what they saw as true Christianity. Also cast out were the Renaissance purveyors of the ancient wisdom narrative – such as Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Bruno – as well as figures such as Paracelsus and Boehme.

The result was the creation of a kind of "wastebasket" of rejected knowledge (to use Hanegraaff's vivid description). Quite without intending to, these historians had created the category of what we call today "esotericism." From then on, these esoteric figures and movements – though they often had little in common – would be seen as all somehow belonging with one another in a "counter tradition." Secular Enlightenment historians basically adopted the approach of the Protestants, only this time esoteric currents were rejected not because of their apparent incompatibility with Christianity, but because they were considered "irrational." (Interestingly, both the Protestant theologians and the Enlightenment rationalists were united in their hostility to the esotericists' claims to "inner illumination."[7]) The result, to make a very long story short, was the construction of the history of science and philosophy that we are familiar with today. In both cases, Hanegraaff argues, what has occurred is that certain figures and schools of thought have been marginalized due to the prejudices of historians.

[6] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 103.

[7] See Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 137. It would be a gross error, however, to make a sharp distinction between the two groups. It was possible for someone to be both a Protestant theologian (or, at least, a Protestant) and an Enlightenment rationalist, and indeed many men saw themselves as such.

On the one hand, Hanegraaff has given us an account of the process by which different esoteric currents came to be understood as all belonging together under one rubric. On the other hand, he also argues that our modern conceptions of "real" science and "real" philosophy were formed in opposition to this discarded "other" – which was itself a construction of modern science and philosophy! There is thus a simple reason for the embarrassment of historians of philosophy and science when confronted with the facts mentioned earlier about Newton, Goethe, and Kant: To be rational and "modern" means *not* to believe in the esoteric.

This account of the construction of esotericism offers us a great deal of insight, but it does not follow from it that we cannot discern fundamental common features of things esoteric – and Hanegraaff does not claim otherwise. (Later on, I will very briefly discuss his own account of what characterizes esotericism.) A much more radical version of Hanegraaff's "constructivist" approach is to be found in the work of Kocku von Stuckrad, who, for all intents and purposes, denies that there is any such thing as esotericism with discernible, common features.[8] Instead, according to Stuckrad, we can speak only of "esoteric discourses," united solely by the fact that they are all "others" rejected by the cultural forces of modernity described earlier. Esotericism is, thus, merely a "construct."

This position invites a basic question: *In virtue of what* were esoteric thinkers, schools, and texts seen as belonging together? In virtue of what traits were they marginalized by modernity? We are faced with a question parallel to the one Socrates raises about piety in the *Euthyphro*: Is something esoteric because it was rejected by the Enlightenment; or was it rejected by the Enlightenment because it was esoteric (i.e., because it had certain specific features)? On most days, the items in my wastebasket have nothing in common other than that I no longer want them. But on the days I am pruning the house of specific sorts of things, the items in my wastebasket have a great deal in common – even though it might not be obvious to anyone other than myself.

If we turn, then, to attempts to identify the characteristic features of esotericism – the features that so enraged Enlightenment rationalists – we will find that the best place to begin is with the approach of Antoine Faivre, arguably the major figure in the academic study of esotericism now living. In *Access to Western Esotericism*, Faivre stipulates that there are four fundamental

[8] See Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Stuckrad's approach is critiqued in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 361–367.

characteristics of esotericism (which he calls a "form of thought"), that is, four basic criteria for deciding whether something belongs to this category. He states, "By nature they are more or less inseparable, as we shall see, but methodologically it is important to distinguish between them."[9] These characteristics are:

1. "Correspondences." The entire universe is conceived in esoteric thought as an emblem book. "Everything is a sign," Faivre states.[10] The most fundamental of these correspondences is that of the macrocosm and the microcosm, which underlies, among other things, astrology.
2. "Living Nature." This is the notion of what is sometimes called "cosmic sympathies" (which is obviously related to the idea of correspondences). Nature is a living whole, whose finite members exist in relations of sympathy or antipathy to one another. As Faivre points out, it is the knowledge of these sympathies and antipathies that forms the basis of magic (as well as, just to mention two more examples, Paracelsism and animal magnetism).
3. "Imagination and Mediations." Faivre explains: "The idea of correspondences presumes already a form of imagination inclined to reveal and use mediations of all kinds, such as rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits."[11]
4. "Experience of Transmutation." Esotericism tends to involve the attempt to effect a fundamental transformation of things in the world (as in alchemical transmutation or magic) and/or of the self. Of course, nuclear physics also deals with the fundamental transformation of things in the world, so here we must note the obvious, that esoteric transmutation involves, as Faivre puts it, "the passage from one plane [of reality] to another."[12] And the other plane, standing opposed to this mundane one, is not accessible by empirical science.

In addition to these four fundamental features of esotericism, Faivre also lists two other elements that are frequently, though not always, found together with those just discussed:

[9] Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 10. As I discuss shortly, Faivre actually lists six criteria on pp. 10–15 of *Access*. Faivre repeats the same list in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York: Crossroad, 1995), xv–xx; and in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), xxi–xxiv.
[10] Faivre, *Access*, 10.
[11] Faivre, *Access*, 12.
[12] Faivre, *Access*, 13.

5. "The Praxis of the Concordance." This involves a tendency on the part of many esoteric thinkers to try and find links between different traditions or teachings, or among all of them. This praxis is itself conceived as a means to enlightenment: It is the identification of the one, true, universal tradition. One finds this feature displayed prominently in the "Traditionalist" school of René Guénon, and in C. G. Jung (both of whom are given their own essays herein), among others.
6. "Transmission." Esoteric teachings are "transmitted from master to disciple following a pre-established channel." The validity of esoteric knowledge somehow depends on this pedigree, and "initiation" into certain paths is only possible through an unbroken line of transmission.[13]

Of course, any attempt to define esotericism (or any other subject, for that matter) in terms of a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions will never please everyone. There will always be some scholar eager to assert that while we are quite willing to call *x* esoteric, it does not fit all the stipulated criteria. But part of the problem here is that many academics are so lost in minutiae and so wedded to ultra-fine-grained distinctions that they are often unable to see the proverbial forest for the trees. Indeed, some are so averse to generalizations that they brand any attempt to synthesize knowledge with the shopworn postmodern smear "essentialism." But it is the nature of the human mind to seek the "essence" of things, by which I mean simply a fundamental common trait, or set of traits. Speaking of essential traits is problematic only when there are none, or when we have misidentified them. (And postmodernists are oblivious to the irony of grouping their opponents under the rubric of essentialism – as if, after all, they shared some common essence.)

In the main, I think that Faivre's methodology is sound – and at least gives us a place to start.[14] It is difficult to think of any esoteric currents discussed in this book to which his four primary criteria do not apply. But in order to see those currents as they were seen by the Enlightenment zealots who, in Hanegraaff's account, marginalized them and thereby created an esoteric counter tradition, we have to go deeper.

[13] Faivre, *Access*, 14–15.
[14] Both Hanegraaff and Stuckrad have criticized Faivre's approach. I am not altogether persuaded by their criticisms, though I recognize that Faivre's account has its flaws. As will become apparent, I am using it as a means to reach what I regard as a deeper level of analysis.

4 The Nature of Esotericism – A Synthesis of Approaches

If one considers Faivre's first two criteria, "correspondences" and "living nature," one will realize that what is at work in both cases is a kind of "qualitative" approach to understanding nature. For instance, the Renaissance magus Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) believed in a *spiritus mundi* permeating the entire universe, which human beings can draw on to improve their lot. This activity is magic, and it consists primarily in attracting the influences of particular planets through the use of various substances associated with them: precious stones, animals, scents, colors, and so forth. To draw on the influence of Jupiter, Ficino advises us to use "Jovial things" such as silver, sugar, and white honey; to think Jovial thoughts; and to bear in mind Jupiter's association with certain animals, such as eagles and lambs.[15]

Thus, correspondences are based on qualitative identities: Though silver, white honey, and eagles are quite different, they all possess a "Jovial quality" (or, we could say, they are qualitatively related to Jupiter). At the basis of the idea of "cosmic sympathies" is just this notion of qualitative ties. Needless to say, this way of thinking is now extremely alien to us, precisely because it was discarded in the modern period in favor of the *quantitative* approach to understanding nature. According to the modern outlook, all qualitative differences ultimately reduce to quantitative ones: to the combination and recombination, in quantifiable patterns and proportions, of basic material particles that are, in themselves, bereft of any of the qualities familiar to us from experience. This quantitative approach is, of course, still very much with us – and not just in science departments. It is at the basis of the modern worldview itself: our way of looking at life, at value, at being as such. It is not for nothing that René Guénon described modernity as "the reign of quantity" (see the essay on him in this volume).[16]

The qualitative approach to nature is not just a feature of esotericism: One finds it in what we normally categorize as ancient philosophy and science. So, for example, Aristotle in *On Generation and Corruption* speaks of what has come to be called the "four elements" – earth, air, fire, and water – but which

[15] See *Marsilio Ficino*, ed. Angela Voss (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2006), 116.

[16] We find earlier esotericists explicitly aware of the conflict between their approach and modernity. To take but one example, Franz Josef Molitor (1779–1860) states: "Each really-existent creaturely essence exists thus in a living form. However, in our current fallen condition, it is no longer easily possible to know the inner qualitative essence of things . . . which is possible via the holy language. We have become concerned only with the outward 'objective,' quantitative relationships among things; we have forgotten that the outer forms or signatures of things reveal the world of their inner, spiritual qualities." Quoted in Arthur Versluis, *Theosophia* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 1994), 77.

would be more accurately described as the four material qualities: the cold and dry, the hot and wet, the hot and dry, and the cold and wet. These four elements were, of course, bequeathed to alchemy. And it is partly on account of alchemy's qualitative approach that it was gradually divorced from chemistry.[17] (There are other major reasons for alchemy's marginalization, which I will come to in a moment.)

Consider next Faivre's category of "imagination and mediations." Faivre himself notes (as quoted earlier) that this way of thinking makes possible the worldview that contains correspondences and cosmic sympathies. And to the modern mindset, it is fatally and irredeemably "subjective." In the modern worldview, objectivity is virtually the same as measurability: Whatever cannot be measured, for all intents and purposes, may be said not to exist. Thus, the modern ideal of objectivity is inextricably tied to its emphasis on the quantitative. And this makes modernity fundamentally "extraverted," for only the "out there" can be measured. The "in here," my private world of thoughts, feelings, and (above all) imagination cannot be measured in any truly objective fashion. The idea that private intuitions, feelings, and imaginative reveries might be guides to truth is wholly anathema to the modern worldview. For modernity, the subjective is a dark realm; a source of falsehood and deception. Thus, any knowledge claims based on such subjective sources are simply ruled out. Even in modern psychology, which is supposed to be the science of subjectivity, strenuous efforts have been made to banish subjectivity. Behaviorism, of course, is the most extreme example.

One can easily see that a tremendous amount of what we classify as the esoteric is based on the subjective sources just described. After all, how did Ficino (and the older thinkers he relied on) arrive at the idea that there was some kind of sympathy between, for instance, the planet Jupiter and lambs? It was through the use of imagination: through getting a certain "feel" for the connections between things. Occultists such as Ficino will claim that others following the same path, and with a similar openness and sensitivity, will arrive at the same conclusions – and thus their assertions of correspondences and sympathies are genuinely objective, by virtue of intersubjective agreement. Needless to say, this position is not taken seriously by modern thinkers.

The same subjective element is to be found in alchemy – that is, the same reliance on felt or intuited connections. The essay on alchemy in this volume (by Lawrence Principe) discusses how the Jungian school, and others, have emphasized the "spiritual" element of alchemy virtually to the point of denying that laboratory alchemy took place. My own position is that

[17] See Versluis, *Theosophia*, 97.

alchemy was indeed a physical process, but inseparable – in the minds of most alchemists – from a spiritual one. (Heinrich Khunrath, 1560–1605, and Oswald Croll, ca. 1563–1609, are excellent examples.) This is arguably the primary reason it was banished from the discipline we now know as chemistry.

Needless to say, everything in esotericism that involves access to "higher worlds" (whether through visions, "astral projection," or what have you), spirit-seeing, mediumship, "psychic healing," precognition, telepathy, sympathetic magic, and so forth all depends on claims that flow from the authority of some supernormal aspect of subjectivity. This brings us directly to Faivre's fourth aspect of esotericism, "the experience of transmutation," which involves, as I have already quoted, "the passage from one plane to another." In the eyes of modernity, the greatest sin committed by esotericism is not specifically the subjectivism I have just discussed but rather the claim to have obtained (via special subjective powers) access to "other realities," which in principle cannot be reached by the empirical methods of modern science. As noted earlier, for modernity what is not measurable "out there" – directly or indirectly – is not real. There is not a single aspect of what is treated in this volume as esotericism that does not explicitly or implicitly challenge this modern conviction.

Finally, Faivre's fifth and sixth aspects of esotericism, treated together, bring us to a further and especially revealing insight into the unity of esotericism, from the perspective of modernity. Faivre speaks, again, of "the praxis of the concordance" and of "transmission." The common denominator of these two is reverence for the authority of tradition. And this is arguably not only the key element involved in modernity's rejection of esoteric currents – it may well give us the key feature of modernity as such.[18] Contempt for the authority of tradition is as central to the modern mindset as the "reign of quantity." For the esotericists, truth is to found in the oldest of old things; the new and original are generally viewed with suspicion.[19] For the moderns, only the new and the original are worthy of respect; the past is a record of mistakes, not a gold mine of eternal verities, and the more distant the past the darker the gloom of ignorance and irrationality.

Modernity was born in the reaction against authority of all kinds. In philosophy and the sciences, it was usually the authority of Aristotle, and

[18] August Heumann (1681–1764), often cited as the founder of the modern discipline of the history of philosophy, claimed that one of the worst sins of the esotericists was that they appeal to tradition rather than to logic. See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 131.

[19] A notable exception to this is Paracelsus, who often attacked tradition. Many Paracelsians did not follow him in this, however.

those who were taken (often erroneously) to be true to his thought. What is interesting, however, is that Aristotle himself never appeals to authority. He begins most of his works by explaining why his predecessors were wrong and is universally quoted as having said "Dear is Plato, dearer still truth" (and though no one can find this line in Aristotle's writings, it is nonetheless true to his spirit). Imagine, therefore, the outrage the fathers of modernity must have felt when sitting in judgment on esoteric traditions that not only explicitly appealed to authority in making truth claims but that – as per Faivre's praxis of the concordance – viewed the search for agreement among the authorities as a method for discovering truth! (An appeal to the majority of authorities, in other words.) Here, we have one of the principal factors in the separation of alchemy from chemistry – or, we might say, the construction of the modern discipline of chemistry. Modern chemistry accepts no appeals to authority, only testing, observation, and experiment. The alchemical tradition, on the other hand, abounds in such appeals.[20]

We have now discovered four fundamental features esoteric currents have in common, which led to their marginalization by the Enlightenment. Taken together, these elements constitute the antithesis of the spirit of modernity:

1. A qualitative approach to understanding nature – as opposed to the quantitative approach of modernity.
2. A reliance on subjectivity and subjective impressions of a highly rarefied nature – as opposed to the rejection of the subjective in favor of what is "objective" and measurable.
3. Knowledge claims regarding other aspects of reality (or other sorts of beings) accessible only by those subjective means – as opposed to the narrowly-defined empiricism of modernity.
4. Reverence for the authority of tradition as a source of truth – as opposed to modernity's rejection of tradition and insistence that history is the record of our emergence from darkness into the light.[21]

[20] See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 202–207, for a discussion of how preoccupation with the idea of recovering a lost tradition led to the marginalization of what we now call alchemy and the sharp divide between alchemy as pseudo-science and chemistry as legitimate science.

[21] These four fundamental characteristics are not meant to supplant the analysis offered by Faivre, but rather to deepen it. The four I have offered constitute an attempt to identify the root assumptions or attitudes that make possible the four (or, rather, the six) discussed by Faivre. Hanegraaff also perceives that what Faivre has offered as the characteristics of esotericism constitute, in effect, a repudiation of the modern worldview. His observations complement my own: "the notion of 'correspondences' is clearly an alternative to instrumental causality, 'living nature' stands against a mechanistic worldview, 'imagination/meditations' implies a multi-leveled neoplatonic cosmology as opposed to a

Understood in terms of these four features, what we know today as the different varieties of esotericism had to be rejected by the Enlightenment. One of the interesting things that emerges from this analysis is the ease with which one can identify the fundamental features of modernity (named as the second element in each numbered item above) precisely in terms of what it rejected (thus supporting Hanegraaff's thesis that the modern identity was partly constructed through what it disowned).

It would be far too simplistic, however, to say that these four characteristics constitute the essence of the "pre-modern worldview." Matters are much more complex than that, regardless of what early modern authors may have thought. As we have already seen, in certain ways Aristotle was much closer to the moderns than they thought he was. Indeed, of the four characteristics just summarized, only the first would be applicable to him, and then only with certain qualifications. Aristotle would, in fact, have vigorously repudiated claims to special, subjective revelations.[22] Whereas an argument can be made that Parmenides, though classed with Aristotle among the philosophers, fits all four (see the essay about him in this volume). In a certain sense, there have always been "ancients" and "moderns." Aristotle is much closer to the modern temperament than was, for example, C. G. Jung, who nonetheless dressed up his thought in the garb of modern science.

Still, while esotericism cannot be identified with the ancient worldview *simpliciter*, Hanegraaff makes an excellent point when he suggests that the "red thread" running throughout esotericism is paganism. He writes, "The factor of 'paganism' has been neglected by modern scholars of Western esotericism to an extent that seems amazing at first sight: While the importance of its specific historical manifestations (particularly hermetism) is obviously recognized, it plays no structural role in how the field has been constructed or defined."[23] The Protestant theologians who cast out all that we now call esotericism due to its "un-Christian" qualities were certainly bigoted, but they were not wrong. A little reflection on the esoteric topics and forms of thought discussed herein will suffice to reveal either their origin in the pagan, pre-Christian milieu, or their affinities with it. Astrology,

cosmos reducible to only matter in motion, and 'transmutation' implies the theosophical/alchemical process of regeneration by which fallen man and nature are reunited with the divine." See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254. As noted earlier, however, Hanegraaff is critical of Faivre's approach. See especially pp. 352–354.

[22] In the short treatise *De divinatione per somnum*, Aristotle expresses considerable skepticism about prophetic dreams.

[23] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 369.

magic, and number symbolism (think Pythagoras), spiritualism (think shamanism and necromancy), and panpsychism are obvious examples. And one has only to scratch the so-called Christians a bit – men such as Ficino, Pico, Paracelsus, and Boehme – to find the pagan.

It seems, therefore, that the features of esotericism discussed earlier are characteristic of a certain way of thinking that was indeed ubiquitous in the ancient world – but that is also perennial. We lack a good word for it and keep changing our minds. "Esotericism" is merely the term currently in vogue – though it is no better a choice than "occultism," and practically means the same thing. Historians such as Hanegraaff are correct to note that before modernity, and well into modernity's infancy, what we call esotericism not only coexisted with what we now think of as science and philosophy, but the lines between them were often unclear. Yet it is a fact that what has been lumped together under the rubric of esotericism has discernible common features that set it apart from the tendencies that were ultimately victorious in the modern period.

The picture that emerges is that the tapestry of Western intellectual history was woven out of a number of distinct and often antagonistic strands. But in the distant past, the figures in the tapestry – not surprisingly – often did not discern the individual strands themselves, or their antagonism. The effect of the Enlightenment was not to "construct" esotericism but to *reveal* it as a distinct current of thought, or worldview, with perceptible features. For the first time, we became aware of esotericism as a discernible tendency of the human spirit, when the stark contrast with the ideology of modernity finally made its outlines clear. Ironically, the Enlightenment did a far more rigorous job of delineating the nature of the esoteric than the Renaissance proponents of the ancient wisdom narrative. In doing so, the Enlightenment also inadvertently offered to those who felt repulsed and alienated by modernity a way to connect the dots between the different strains of archaic "irrationalism" to which they felt a passionate and intuitive attraction.

We are now in a position to sum things up. "Esotericism" refers to a number of theories, practices, and approaches to knowledge united by their participation in a premodern, largely pagan worldview. Central to this worldview is commitment to the idea of the unity of existence – that existence is an interrelated whole in which seemingly dissimilar things exist in qualitative correspondence and vibrant, living sympathy. The ruling correspondence is "as above, so below": The objects that surround us (and their relationships) mirror, in a fashion that can be called "emblematic," the fundamental features of the universe as a whole. Most important of all, we mirror those features in our own bodies and souls. These correspondences are

discovered through the cultivation of supernormal aspects of human subjectivity, especially of the imagination. Esotericists typically hold that such knowledge can be utilized to effect changes in the world or in the self through causal mechanisms that empiricism finds inexplicable (and, therefore, rejects as impossible). This commitment usually goes hand in hand with the belief that the same supernormal aspects of the subject can reveal the existence of other dimensions of reality, usually hidden from view. Further, esotericists typically believe that the truths and practices just mentioned are of the greatest antiquity – perhaps once widely disseminated and openly proclaimed, but now (and for a great many centuries) hidden and preserved by a few special individuals or schools. Discovery in esotericism is almost always rediscovery.

5 The Relation of Mysticism and Esotericism

The preceding account should already have alerted readers to points at which esotericism and mysticism seem to converge. I have argued that a particular worldview is at the root of esotericism, one that asserts that existence is an interconnected whole shot through with correspondences and sympathies, and that the most fundamental of these correspondences is that of macrocosm and microcosm.

But this is precisely what I identified earlier as the core mystical teaching – the "doctrine" that emerges when mystics attempt to convey in words what the experience of *gnosis* has taught them. Thus, "esotericism" is founded on "mysticism." I have placed these words in quotes once again just to remind readers that the words themselves are inadequate, and that analysis of their literal meaning is not a reliable means to understand that to which they refer. It would be much more accurate to simply state that esotericism is founded on *gnosis*, either directly (when esotericists themselves have the experience of *gnosis*) or indirectly (when esotericists put their faith in the testimony of those who have had the experience). Everything treated in this book as esotericism – alchemy, astrology, magic, number symbolism, visions of other worlds, spiritualism, and so on – is founded in one way or another on the mystical teaching of *hen kai pan* (One and all), and everything that it entails.

It is useful in this context to recall one of the expressions that has been supplanted by the term "esotericism": the "occult sciences." This is normally regarded as loose talk, as a quaint, makeshift way of referring to our subject matter. But there is more to the term than meets the eye. Mysticism affords us with a special experience (if we are fortunate) or with the next-best thing: reports by those who have had the experience. The various items grouped

together as esotericism, by contrast, mainly consist in techniques or practices or specialized areas of investigation (in other words, "sciences," to use the term charitably). Mysticism is *gnosis*; esotericism is *technē* (technique or art). And, as I have argued, this *technē* is founded on *gnosis*.

However, it would be highly misleading to gloss this as "mysticism is theory, esotericism is practice." When an astrologer creates a birth chart and attempts to thereby predict the course of an individual's life, this can certainly be described as a technique or practice. However, it is founded on the astrological *theory* that the stars exercise some kind of causal influence over individuals and events. There is thus both astrological theory and practice. However, the theory is founded on the deeper conviction that the universe is one, and that everything is connected to everything else, including microcosm to macrocosm. This conviction is the fruit of *gnosis*.

Believers in astrology will claim a kind of "empirical proof" for their art, asserting that astrological predictions are borne out by events. If this were true a significant amount of the time, it would constitute proof for astrological theory – and we could say that it would also offer proof of the deeper, mystical conviction of the unity of all things, and the correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm. But those mystical convictions were not arrived at as a result of observing the results of astrological practice, or as a result of inferences drawn from any esoteric practice. Indeed, they are not the result of inferences of any kind. The mystical worldview is the product of *gnosis*, and it is the deep assumption that is brought to esoteric practices of all sorts, not derived from them. Esotericism is founded on mysticism (i.e., esoteric *technē* is founded on mystical *gnosis*), not the other way around.

Magic provides us with yet another example. As Hanegraaff makes clear in the essay on magic in this volume, the term itself has been used and abused in a great variety of ways. But setting aside the checkered history of the word, when we use it today we are generally referring to a perennial phenomenon found in all cultures throughout all of history: the belief that it is possible for certain individuals, drawing on mysterious and supernormal powers of the soul and using such means as spells, incantations, amulets, and talismans, to manipulate cosmic sympathies or correspondences in order to effect changes in themselves, in the physical world, or even in the powers governing the universe.

Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, this use of the term "magic" is not of recent vintage. Whereas for the Greeks *mageia* was generally associated with the activities of Persian *magoi* (magi), for the Romans *magia* took on a broad meaning more or less identical to our use of "magic." In his *Naturalis historia*, Pliny the Elder (23–79) uses the term *magicae vanitates* ("magical