

THE CHARACTER OF ESOTERIC SCIENCE

The ancient term *esoteric science* is used to describe the contents of this book. This term immediately rouses the most contradictory feelings among contemporary people. For many it is somewhat repellent or calls forth derision, pitying smiles, and perhaps even contempt. They imagine that a way of thinking that describes itself in this way can only be based on idle, fantastic dreaming, that this alleged science can only conceal an impulse to reinstate all kinds of superstitions that those familiar with the “true scientific approach” and “real striving for knowledge” are quite right in avoiding. To others, what is meant by this term seems to provide them with something they cannot acquire in any other way; depending on their personal predispositions, they are drawn to it either out of a deep inner longing for knowledge or out of the curiosity of a refined soul. Between these sharply divergent opinions there are all kinds of possible intermediate stages of conditional rejection or acceptance of what different individuals may think of on hearing the words *esoteric science*. [1]

For many people the term *esoteric science* has a magical ring to it because it seems to appease their fateful obsession with knowing of something unknown, mysterious, or even obscure, with a knowledge that cannot be acquired naturally. Many people do not want to satisfy their souls' deepest longings with something that can be clearly known. They tend to believe that in addition to what is recognizable and knowable in the world, there must also be something that eludes cognition. Regarding their deepest longing for knowledge, and with a peculiar illogicality they do not notice, they reject everything known and choose to accept only something that cannot be said to be knowable through any natural form of research. Anyone who speaks of "esoteric science" would do well to keep in mind the need to confront misunderstandings caused by some of its advocates who are striving not for knowledge but for its opposite.

[2] This account is aimed at readers who will not allow their impartiality to be shaken by the fact that a term calls forth prejudices under certain circumstances. There can be no talk here of a knowledge that is "secret" in the sense of being accessible only to certain people because of some especially favorable destiny. We will do justice to the term *esoteric science* as it is used here if we think of what Goethe had in mind when he spoke of the "revealed mysteries" in the phenomena of the universe.¹

1. "There are so many revealed mysteries because the feeling for them becomes conscious in so few people, and these few, fearing to harm themselves and others, do not give voice to their inner explanations." Goethe in a letter to C.L.F. Schultz, November 28, 1821, in *Goethes Werke (Goethe's Works)*, Weimar ed., sec. 4, vol. 35, 1906, p. 192.

His view sees what remains secret, “esoteric,” or unrevealed in the phenomena we grasp only with our senses and our sense-bound intellect as the content of a supersensible way of knowing.² Of course, to those who restrict science to what is revealed through the senses and the intellect that serves them, what is meant here by *esoteric science* does not constitute a science. If such people wish to understand themselves, however, they must admit that they reject esoteric science not on the basis of well-founded insight, but simply on the authority of their purely personal feelings.

In order to realize this, all we need to do is to consider how sciences come about and what significance they have in human life. The definitive factor in the birth of a science is not the object that is studied but the type of human soul-activity that takes place during the scientific quest. The activity and attitude of the soul involved in the study of science is what we need to look at. If we acquire the

2. Some people have rejected the term *esoteric science*, as used by the author in earlier editions of this book, on the grounds that a science cannot be something that is secret or “esoteric” to anyone. This objection would have been correct if that had been the intent in using this term, but that is not the case. The natural sciences, the sciences of nature, cannot be called “natural” in the sense that they belong to everyone “by nature.” Similarly, the author understands *esoteric science* to be not a “secret” science but a science “of the esoteric,” a science that deals with what is “secret” and unrevealed in the phenomena of the universe as far our ordinary means of cognition are concerned. This science, however, should not remain a secret for anyone who searches for its knowledge in appropriate ways [note by Rudolf Steiner; see also note, page 29.]

habit of exercising activity of this sort only when dealing with what the senses disclose, we may easily succumb to the opinion that the sense perception is the essential factor. In that case, we fail to look at the fact that specific activities and attitudes of the human soul have been applied, but only to what is sense-perceptible. However, it is possible to transcend this arbitrary, self-imposed limitation and look at the character of scientific activity itself without regard to its specific application.

This is our basis for speaking of knowledge of the non-sensory content of the world as "scientific." The human power of cognition tries to become involved with this content in the same way that it would otherwise become involved with the world's natural scientific content. It is the intent of spiritual science to free the methods and attitudes of scientific research from their particular application to the relationships and processes of sensory facts while preserving their way of thinking and other attributes. Spiritual science attempts to speak about non-sensory things in the same way that the natural sciences speak about sense-perceptible things. While natural-scientific methods of research and ways of thinking stop short at the sensory world, esoteric science views the soul's work in the natural world as a means of self-education and attempts to apply the faculties that develop in this way to non-sensory domains. Instead of attempting to speak about sensory phenomena as such, esoteric science speaks about the non-sensory contents of the world in the same way that scientists speak about its sense-perceptible contents. In this process, it retains the inner attitude of the

scientific method, which is what makes the study of nature a science in the first place. This permits esoteric science to call itself a science.

When we begin to consider it, we will find that the significance of the natural sciences in human life is not exhausted in acquiring knowledge about nature, since this knowledge can never lead to anything except experiences of what the human soul itself is *not*. The soul principle does not live in what we know about nature; it lives in the process of knowing. The soul experiences itself during its active involvement with nature, and the result of this living involvement is something other than knowledge about nature itself, namely the self-development experienced in acquiring this knowledge. Esoteric science attempts to apply the result of this self-development to areas that transcend mere nature. It is not the intent of esoteric scientists to underestimate the value of the natural sciences. On the contrary, they try to acknowledge it even more than the natural scientists do. They know that it is impossible to establish any science without the exacting way of thinking that is the rule in the natural sciences, but they also know that after this exactitude has been acquired by genuinely entering into the spirit of natural scientific thought, the soul's strength can hold it fast and apply it to other fields. [3]

Something appears at this point, however, that may cause misgivings. While observing nature, the soul is guided by the object under observation to a much greater extent than it is while observing the world's non-sensory contents, when it has to be able to hold fast to the essence [4]

of the scientific way of thinking out of purely inner impulses to a much greater extent. Since many people believe—although not consciously—that only the guidance of natural phenomena allows us to retain this essence, they tend to decide dogmatically that as soon as this guidance is abandoned, the soul with its scientific method is left groping in the dark. These people have not become aware of the distinctive character of this method; for the most part, they base their judgment on errors that necessarily arise when someone whose scientific attitude has not been sufficiently reinforced by observing natural phenomena nonetheless proceeds to observe non-sensory domains. Such cases naturally give rise to a lot of unscientific talk about the world's non-sensory content. However, this is not because such talk is essentially incapable of being scientific, but only because in this particular instance the scientific self-education that comes from observing nature was neglected.

[5] With regard to what has just been said, however, anyone wanting to speak about esoteric science must keep a sharp eye out for all the distractions and illusions that can arise from conjecturing about the revealed mysteries of the world without approaching them scientifically. And yet it would be counterproductive, right at the beginning of an account of esoteric science, to speak about all the possible aberrations that discredit its research in the minds of biased people, because these people conclude from the very existence of the aberrations—and it is true that they are very numerous—that the entire undertaking is unjustified. In most instances, however, scientists or

scientifically minded critics reject esoteric science dogmatically, as was described earlier, and their reference to the aberrations is merely a pretext that is often unconscious. Discussion with such opponents will prove futile. Indeed, nothing prevents them from raising the very justified objection that there is no way of determining from the outset whether the person who believes others are in error actually possesses the firm foundation described above. Therefore, all that can be done by people who are striving in the direction of esoteric science is to present what they believe is permissible for them to say. Whether this belief is justified can only be decided by others, and in fact only by those who avoid dogmatic statements of any sort and are able to enter into how these esoteric researchers communicate the revealed mysteries of cosmic events. Of course the researchers will be obliged to show how what they present relates to other achievements of knowledge and of life. They will also need to show what opposition is possible and to what extent life's immediate outer, sense-perceptible reality confirms their observations. However, they should never attempt to present things in a way that depends on the art of persuasion rather than on content for its effect.

Esoteric scientific accounts often meet with the objection that they do not prove what they present, that they merely make some assertion or other and say that esoteric science has determined this to be true. Do not misunderstand the account that follows by thinking that any part of it is being presented in this manner. An effort is being made here to allow the capability that unfolds in

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the soul through studying nature to continue to develop according to its own essence. In the course of this development the soul encounters supersensible facts. It is assumed that every reader who is able to really go into what has been presented will necessarily run up against these facts. The moment we enter the domain of spiritual science, however, we encounter a difference between it and purely natural scientific observation. In the natural sciences, facts are present in the field of the sensory world; scientists who present these facts regard the activity of the soul as something that recedes into the background in the face of sense-perceptible relationships and processes. Those who present spiritual scientific facts must place this soul activity in the forefront, because their readers only arrive at the facts by making this activity their own in the right way. Unlike the facts of natural science, which—although not understood—are still available for human perception even without any soul activity, spiritual scientific facts enter into our perception only through activity on the part of the soul. Thus those presenting spiritual science presume that the readers are accompanying them on the search for these facts. Their presentation consists of recounting the discovery of these facts and is governed not by personal whim, but by a scientific attitude trained by natural science. Therefore, they must also speak about the means they use to become able to observe non-sensory, supersensible things.

By attempting to present an esoteric scientific subject, we will soon see that this leads us to acquire concepts

and ideas that we did not possess before. The new thoughts we acquire about the nature of proof are also different from our previous conceptions of it. We learn to recognize that when natural science is explained, “proof” is something brought toward it from the outside, so to speak. In spiritual scientific thinking, however, the activity applied to proving something in natural scientific thinking is already present in the search for the facts. We cannot find these facts if the path that leads to them does not constitute a proving process in itself. Anyone who really follows this path already experiences the element of proof, and nothing more can be accomplished by means of a proof applied from outside. Failure to recognize this characteristic of esoteric science has led to many misunderstandings.

The whole of esoteric science must spring from two thoughts that can take root in each human being. For the esoteric scientist, as the term is used in this book, these two thoughts express facts that can be experienced if we apply the right means. For many other people, these thoughts constitute extremely debatable claims that can provoke a great deal of argument and may even be “proved” to be impossible. The first of these thoughts is that behind the visible world there is an invisible one, a world that is temporarily concealed, at least as far as our senses and sense-bound thinking are concerned. The second is that by developing human capacities that lie dormant in us, it is possible to enter this hidden world.

Some people may say that there is no such hidden world, that the world we perceive with our senses is the

only one, that it contains everything necessary to solve its riddles, and that even if we are far from being able to answer all our existential questions at present, a time will come when sensory experiences and the science based on them will be able to provide the answers.

[10] Others say that we cannot state definitively that there is no hidden world behind the visible one, but our human powers of cognition cannot penetrate this world because they have limits that they cannot overstep. Although those who need “faith” may take refuge in a world of that sort, a true science based on the guarantee of fact cannot be concerned with such a world.

[11] A third group sees it as rather presumptuous to want to penetrate into a domain where we must renounce “knowledge” and be content with “faith.” Those who adhere to this position find it wrong for the feeble human being to want to penetrate into a world that is supposed to be the exclusive province of religious life.

[12] Still others raise the objection that it is possible for everyone to share a common knowledge of the facts of the sense-perceptible world, but since knowledge of supersensible things is only a matter of personal, individual opinion, we should not speak of universal certainty in such things.

[13] And there are others who make many other assertions.

[14] It becomes clear that observing the visible world presents us with riddles that can never be solved on the basis of the facts of this world alone. They will never be solved in this way, regardless of how far the science of these facts may advance, because the very inner nature of the

visible facts points clearly to a hidden world. If we do not realize this, we are shutting ourselves off to the riddles that spring up everywhere out of the facts of the sensory world. We *choose* not to see certain questions and riddles, and so we believe that all questions can be answered by means of sense-perceptible facts. The questions we choose to ask may indeed all be answered by the facts we expect will be discovered in the future. There is no reason not to concede that this is the case. But why should we wait for answers to certain things if we ask no questions about them? Those who aspire to an esoteric science are only saying that the questions they ask are a matter of course for them and should be acknowledged as fully legitimate expressions of the human soul. After all, science cannot be forced into narrow confines by forbidding people to ask unbiased questions.

In response to the opinion that there are limits to human cognition which we cannot overstep and which force us to come to a halt in front of any invisible world that may be there, it must be said that there can be no doubt in anyone's mind that it is *not* possible to push one's way into an invisible world with that particular kind of cognition. For anyone who believes that form of cognition to be the one and only form, it is impossible to arrive at any other view of the matter than that human beings are denied access to any higher world that may exist. But it can also be said that if it is possible to develop another form of cognition, this could lead into the supersensible world. If we consider this form of cognition impossible, we reach a viewpoint that makes any talk of a supersensible world seem like pure

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nonsense. To an impartial judge, however, the only possible reason for this viewpoint is that its champions are unfamiliar with any other form of cognition. Yet how can people pass judgment on something while insisting that they know nothing about it? Unbiased thinking must concur with the statement that we should speak only about things we know and not make statements about things we do not know. This kind of thinking can only speak of people's right to communicate what they have experienced, but not of any right on their part to declare something impossible if they know (or choose to know) nothing about it. No one can ever deny others the right to ignore the supersensible, but there is never any legitimate reason for people to declare themselves authorities, not only on what they themselves are capable of knowing, but also on what they suppose cannot be known by any human being.

[16] In the case of those who declare it presumptuous to enter the domain of the supersensible, an esoteric scientific view must call their attention to the fact that it is possible to enter this domain and that we sin against the faculties we have been given if we allow them to stagnate instead of developing them and putting them to use.

[17] However, anyone who believes that views concerning the supersensible world are strictly a matter of personal opinions and feelings denies what is common to all human beings. It is certainly true that individuals must find insight into such things on their own, but it is also a fact that all people who go far enough come to the same insight about these things rather than to different insights. Differences exist only when people try to approach the

highest truths through an arbitrary personal whim rather than by a scientifically guaranteed path. It must be admitted without reservation, however, that only those who are willing to immerse themselves in the unique character of the esoteric scientific path are capable of acknowledging that it is correct.

If we acknowledge—or even merely assume or surmise from the manifest world—the existence of a hidden world, and if our awareness that our powers of cognition are capable of development compels us to feel that this hidden world can reveal itself to us, then each one of us will be able to find the way to esoteric science at the individually appropriate time. When individuals have been led to esoteric science by these soul experiences, several prospects open up before them. One is the prospect of finding the answer to certain questions posed by their craving for knowledge; another is the quite different prospect of victory over everything that impedes and weakens life. [18]

In a certain higher sense, it signifies a weakening of life or even a soul death when a person is forced to deny or turn away from the supersensible world. Under certain circumstances it even leads to despair when someone loses hope that the hidden will be revealed. At the same time, the various forms of this death and despair oppose esoteric scientific efforts on the inner level of the soul. They set in when our inner strength dwindles. If we are then to have any strength for life at all, it must come from outside. Then we perceive the things, beings, and processes that appear to our senses, and we analyze them with our intellect. They cause us joy and sorrow; they

drive us to whatever actions we are capable of. We can carry on like this for a while, but eventually we reach the point of dying inwardly, because we have exhausted what can be drawn from the world in this way for a human being's sake. This is not a statement stemming from the personal experience of one individual; it results from an unbiased consideration of all human life. What shields us from exhausting this source is the hidden element that rests within the depths of things. Ultimately, if the strength to descend into these depths to draw up new strength for life dies away in a human being, the outer aspect of things also proves to be no longer conducive to life.

[19] This is by no means a matter of concern only to the individual human being with his or her personal well-being and misfortune. Precisely through true esoteric scientific observations, we arrive at the certainty that from a higher standpoint, an individual's well-being and misfortune are intimately related to the well-being or misfortune of the whole world. We come to the insight that we are causing damage to the whole world and all the beings in it when we do not develop our own forces in the right way. If we ravage our life by losing our connection to the supersensible world, not only do we destroy something within us, something that can ultimately drive us to despair as it dies off, but our weakness also creates a hindrance to the evolution of the entire world in which we live.

[20] Now, it is possible for human beings to deceive themselves. We succumb to the belief that there is no hidden element, that what appears to our senses and our intellect includes everything that can possibly exist. This

deception, however, is only possible on the surface of consciousness, not in its depths. Our feeling and desire do not submit to this deceptive belief. In one way or another, they will always long for something hidden. If this is withheld from us, it forces us into doubt, into uncertainty in life, or even into despair. Cognition that reveals what is hidden is suited to overcoming all this hopelessness, uncertainty, and despair—in short, everything that weakens a life and makes it incapable of performing the services required of it within the world as a whole.

This is the beautiful fruit of spiritual scientific knowledge—rather than merely gratifying our passion for knowledge, it gives our life strength and steadfastness. It draws strength for work and confidence in life from an inexhaustible source. No one who has ever truly approached this source and returns repeatedly to take refuge there will ever go away unstrengthened.

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There are people who do not want to know anything about such knowledge because they see something unhealthy in what has just been said. As far as the outer, superficial aspect of life is concerned, these people are right. They do not want what life offers in its so-called reality to be diminished in any way. They see it as a weakness when people turn away from reality and seek salvation in a hidden world that seems fantastic and dreamed-up. If we do not want to fall into a state of pathological dreaminess and weakness in our spiritual scientific search, we must acknowledge that such objections are partially justified. They rest on healthy judgment that leads to a half-truth rather than to a whole one

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only because it does not thrust its way into the depths of things but remains on the surface. If striving for supersensible knowledge were likely to weaken life and turn people away from true reality, then such objections would certainly be strong enough to pull the foundation out from under this spiritual trend.

[23] However, it is not appropriate for esoteric scientific efforts to respond to such opinions by “defending” themselves in the usual sense of the word. In this case, too, they can speak only out of their own merit, which is apparent to any unbiased person, and make it evident that they supplement the life forces and strength for life of anyone who immerses him or herself in them in the right way. Such efforts cannot turn a person into a dreamer or someone who is alienated from the world; the strength they provide comes from the sources of life that are the origin of the soul and spiritual parts of us.

[24] Still other obstacles may confront many people when they first approach an esoteric scientific search. It is a fundamental truth that readers of esoteric scientific accounts find descriptions of soul experiences which they can follow in order to approach the world’s supersensible contents. But while this is the ideal, it still has to be realized in actual practice.

Readers must first absorb a fairly large number of supersensible experiences recounted by others without experiencing them personally. This cannot be otherwise, and will also be true of this book. The author will describe what he believes he knows about the nature of human beings and what happens to them at birth, at

death, and in the body-free state in the spiritual world. He will also describe the evolution of the Earth and of humanity. It could seem that a certain amount of alleged knowledge is being presented like dogma, as if belief based on authority were called for. However, this is not the case. In fact, what can be known about the world's supersensible content is present in the author as a living soul content, and immersing yourself in this content kindles impulses in your own soul which then lead to the corresponding supersensible facts. In reading about spiritual scientific knowledge, you are active in a different way than you are in reading accounts of sense-perceptible facts. If you read accounts of the sense-perceptible world, you read *about* them, but if you read accounts of supersensible facts in the right way, you immerse yourself in the stream of spiritual existence. By taking in the results of spiritual research, we also set out on our own inner path toward discovering these results for ourselves.

It is true that to begin with, what is meant here is often not noticed at all by those who read it. People imagine entering the spiritual world to be much too similar to a sensory experience, and so they find their experiences in reading about this world much too thought-like. But if we are *truly* absorbing these things as thoughts, we are already in the midst of the spiritual world and must only realize that we are already experiencing (although we do not notice it) what we believed we were merely receiving in the form of thoughts communicated to us.

The real nature of what we have experienced will become completely clear to us if we actually practice

what is described in the second and last part of this book as the path to supersensible knowledge. It would be easy to believe the opposite—that the path would have to be described first. But that is not the case. To anyone who simply does exercises in order to enter the supersensible world without paying any soul-attention to specific facts about it, this world will remain an indistinct and confused chaos. We learn to find our way into that world naively, so to speak, in the process of learning about some of its specific facts; only after that do we abandon our unsuspecting naïveté and realize that we are fully consciously acquiring for ourselves the experiences that have been communicated to us.

If you go into esoteric scientific accounts in depth, you will be convinced that this is the only sure path to supersensible knowledge. You will also realize that the opinion that supersensible knowledge might initially affect us like dogma—through the power of suggestion, as it were—is unfounded, because we acquire the content of this knowledge by means of a soul activity that strips it of any merely suggestive power and only allows it to speak to us in the same way as any truth that addresses our level-headed judgment. Our initial failure to notice that we are living in the spiritual world is not due to lack of thought on our part or to being influenced by suggestion in taking in what we have read, but only to the subtlety and unfamiliarity of what we have experienced while reading. When we first take in communications such as those in the first part of this book, we begin to participate, with help, in knowledge of the supersensible world; through practical application

of the soul exercises given in the second part, we begin to know this world independently.

No real scientists will be able to find any essential contradiction between their science, which is based on the facts of the sense world, and how the supersensible world is investigated. These scientists use certain tools and methods. They produce these tools by transforming what “nature” gives them. Supersensible cognition also makes use of a tool—the human being—that must also first be made suitable for higher research. The human abilities and forces that nature provides without any involvement on the part of the individual must be transformed into higher ones. This is how we can transform ourselves into instruments for investigating the supersensible world.

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