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Reverse-Engineering 'Esotericism':
How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion

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Abstract:
The article introduces a framework for preparing complex cultural concepts for the cognitive science of religion and applies it to the field of Western esotericism. The research process ("reverse engineering") rests on a building block approach that, after problematic categories have been deconstructed, seeks to reconstruct new scholarly objects in generic terms that can be operationalized in interdisciplinary contexts like CSR.

A four-step research process is delineated, illustrated by a short discussion of previous work on "Gnosticism", "magic", and "religion", before applying it to "esotericism". It is suggested that the implicit scholarly objects of esotericism scholarship can be reconstituted in generic terms as concerned with processes of creating and disseminating "special knowledge". Five definitional clusters are identified in the literature; these provide a basis for formulating research programs on the psychological and cognitive level, drawing on metarepresentational processes, event cognition, and psychological dispositions for altering experience.

Keywords: building block approach; esotericism; cognitive science of religion; complex cultural concepts; metatheory; constructionism.

1. Introduction: On Basic Vocabulary, Interdisciplinary Translation, and the Cognitive Science of Religion

The attempt to unmask contested categories has long been a successful cottage industry in the study of religion (e.g. Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2000; Styers 2004, etc.; cf. McCutcheon 2014). While the call for critical reflection on concepts like "religion", "magic", and "ritual" is reproduced time and again, surprisingly little has been said about what to do *after* the fuzzy complexity and dubious discursive origin of problematic terms have been exposed (Schilbrack 2013; but see suggestions in von Stuckrad 2013; Bergunder 2014). This situation is deeply unfortunate, not only for the obvious reason that new theorizing requires new concepts after the old ones have been broken down; coming up with viable tools and research strategies after deconstructing old categories is also crucial to the success of new interdisciplinary ventures, such as the cognitive science of religion (CSR). Deconstructionist analyses of concepts like "religion", "magic", or "mysticism" are absolutely necessary if CSR is to avoid becoming an uncritical carrier of problematic assumptions. Indeed, the attempt to operationalize inappropriate terminology like "magic" (e.g. Sørensen 2007a), "superstition" (Lindeman and Svedholm 2012), or "mystical experience" (Andersen et al. 2014) remains a contentious issue that hinders fruitful dialogue between experimentalists, historians, and ethnographers (cf. Taves 2014). After deconstruction, however, initiatives like CSR need a new, sharp, and precise vocabulary in which to operationalize key concepts, which can later be lifted back up to discussions about culture-level complexities.

One contested category that has mobilized much innovative research in religious studies over the past decade is "esotericism". Congruent with the broader trend in the study of religion, much of the theoretical work on esotericism has been geared towards criticizing and deconstructing the term itself (e.g. von Stuckrad 2005; Bergunder 2010; Hanegraaff 2012; Asprem and Granholm 2013). Despite all this reflection, "esotericism" is still deployed in conflicting ways in different research programs (see Hammer 2008; Asprem 2014a). This conceptual confusion is making dialogue between disciplinary perspectives very difficult, and puts a brake on drives to develop explanatory theory and comparative and experimental methods – all of which require a more

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basic terminology that allows for flexible movement between disciplinary frameworks, historical/cultural contexts, and levels of analysis. I argue that the best way to confront these conceptual problems is to adopt a building block approach (BBA) along the lines recently proposed by Ann Taves (2009, 2013a, 2015). In the current article, I attempt to achieve two things. First, assuming a BBA, I will flesh out a general procedure for reverse-engineering complex cultural concepts (CCCs) such as "esotericism" or "religion". The objective of this methodology is to disentangle contested terms, develop a more generic language for the scholarly objects that researchers actually pursue with these labels ("objects of study"), and use this as a foundation for translation between disciplines and the design of new research programs. This exercise is necessary for a productive interdisciplinary exchange to emerge. Second, by applying this procedure to "esotericism" I aim to take a first step towards preparing that field for future research in a CSR framework. Testing metatheoretical tools for doing this constitutes the core of the present article: Utilizing a battery of discursive methods to "the esoteric" and an attributional analysis of the term's actual usage in key publications (notably the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*), I make the case that the implicit object of study for esotericism scholars can be redescribed in generic terms as the production and dissemination of "special knowledge". Furthermore, a closer reading allows us to distinguish five definitional clusters that determine this "specialness" in different ways. I conclude by proposing ways to translate notions of special knowledge into a technical vocabulary more appropriate for operationalization in the cognitive science of religion, and sketch the contours of three promising lines of research within such a future research program.

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2. A Brief Introduction to the Building Block Approach

2.1 *Objectives and Terminology*

Before proceeding with these two tasks it is necessary to introduce some of the technical terminology of the building block approach and clarify its use.[1] In terms of current debates in the study of religion, the project outlined in this

[1] The definitions that follow have been developed in close collaboration with Ann Taves. For a joint effort, see Taves and Asprem in press.

article can be thought of as one big response to the "Schilbrack question": After we deconstruct contentious categories, then what? Kevin Schilbrack (2012, 2013) asked this question to explore the limits of social constructionism about "religion", but it is relevant to any concept that we may consider "socially constructed", from "gender" and "morality" to "magic" and "esotericism". The particular response to the question that I advocate here, however, differs in one crucial respect from Schilbrack's. While I, too, hold the critical realist assumption that deconstruction is only the first step in a broader process aimed to better "describe realities that exist … apart from one's language and thoughts" (Schilbrack 2013, 108), I do *not* assume that the concepts that we start out deconstructing ("religion", "gender", "esotericism") necessarily re-emerge at the end of the process as useful categories with which to carve up the world. Instead, I hold that to "move beyond … deconstruction to develop terms for social [and cognitive] realities out there in the world" (ibid., 111) often requires us to ditch the starting concepts in favor of more basic and generic terms that help us develop better conceptual and methodological tools for studying these realities.

The basic idea of the BBA, then, is very simple. It seeks to disassemble complex cultural concepts (CCCs) into component parts, trace the ways in which they have been put together, and examine how components and composites relate to things that have, historically, been labeled differently (that is, to other CCCs). This means that CCCs such as "religion" and "esotericism" become our *explananda* rather than our *explanantia*: the BBA does not seek better ways to define these terms for analytic purposes, but better ways to explain whatever it is that these concepts have been taken to refer to (Schilbrack's "realitites") and why.

CCCs are defined as *abstract nouns with unstable, overlapping, culturally-determined meanings that vary within and across formations*. A (socio-cultural) *formation* is defined as *any social entity* (e.g., social movement, network, school of thought, academic discipline) *in which CCCs are temporarily stabilized and given specific meanings*. The process of dis- and re-assembling CCCs is also referred to as *reverse engineering*. This term is intended in rough analogy to procedures better known from software development, industrial design and

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biology, by which researchers break down a ready-made design and study how it was assembled in order to learn how to recreate it.

A central part of the reverse engineering process is to render components of the CCC in *basic concepts*. In contrast to CCCs, these are relatively simple and stable concepts that are grounded in evolved mental architecture and embodied interactions with the environment (see e.g. Sperber 1996, 67-70, 89). Examples include the bodily-based, domain-general schemata studied by cognitive linguistics (e.g., PART-WHOLE, PATH, CONTAINMENT) and concepts such as ACTION, CAUSE, INTENTION, or EVENT that are presumably grounded in evolved, domain-specific learning systems and hence recognizable across cultures (see e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Taylor 2010; Tooby and Cosmides 1992; Leslie 1994). For example, we can talk about actions and events instead of "ritual", and break down CCCs like "belief" and "symbolism" by talking about representations, schemata, or models. Describing the objects of research in terms of more basic and translatable concepts makes it possible to identify lower-level building blocks. Building blocks are defined pragmatically as *discernable lower-level components relative to the level of analysis* of any given discipline or research program. They are emphatically *not* to be viewed as fundamental or indivisible atoms. They are conceptual tools that help us see how complex composites might work – not a route to "foundations", "essences", or "rock bottom".

For example, a historian of religion interested in the ideas and practices of groups and individuals might look to evolved cognitive architecture for finding the building blocks of phenomena s/he encounters in texts. Researchers in cognitive neuroscience might take those same cognitive processes as their objects of research and look for explanatory building blocks on cortical or biochemical levels. Whatever the level of analysis is, for something to serve as a useful building block to that level it needs (1) to be at an ontologically lower level than the level of analysis, and (2) be sufficiently specified to yield meaningful observations from the point of view of the disciplines that are busy studying that lower level. In philosophical terms, then, the BBA assumes a form of supervenience physicalism ("the cultural supervenes on the physical") on broadly emergentist lines (Bedau and Humphreys 2008) that accommodates explanatory pluralism (McCauley 2013) and makes vertical integration of

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disciplines a desirable policy (cf. Tooby and Cosmides 1992; Slingerland 2008; Slingerland and Collard eds. 2011).[2]

2.2 *The Research Process of Reverse Engineering*

The research process of reverse engineering can be described in four steps. First, we identify a CCC in a specific formation (say, "esotericism" in "the academic study of esotericism"). Second, this CCC is deconstructed and disassembled. Third, the researcher uses basic concepts to arrive at a new description in terms of building blocks that can be studied at lower levels. Fourth, from this new vantage point the researcher can test explanatory theories about phenomena constituted by the building blocks in the original formation (i.e., "how does it work"), explore alternative pathways for putting them together ("could it have worked differently"), or set up new comparisons with similar conglomerations in other formations ("what else works this way"). For ease of reference, we may call these four stages:

1) *CCC identification*
2) *Disassembly*
3) *Building block identification*
4) *Reassembly*

A distinct mark of this research process is its ambition to combine constructionist and naturalistic methods. Most of the work in steps 1 and 2 utilize constructionist research strategies that are quite common in the humanities. For example, *CCC identification* is about charting the variable meanings of terms in different social settings and strategic contexts, and

[2] While this is not the place to flesh out a philosophy of science or discuss the finer points and problems of physicalism, supervenience, or emergentism (or, indeed, the relation between them), I include these rough reflections here in order to respect Schilbrack's (2005) plea that scholars ought to make their philosophical commitments as transparent as possible when discussing theory. See Stoljar 2015, especially section 5, for a discussion of the "minimal physicalism" that the BBA, on my understanding, assumes.

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analyzing their role in defining, marking, and policing the identity of the formations that use them. When a CCC has been identified within a specific formation, the process of *disassembly* will utilize a combination of methods to look at the resources (material, social, discursive, cognitive) that the term mobilizes. Useful methods range from Foucauldian genealogy and semantic network analysis to old-fashioned conceptual analysis.

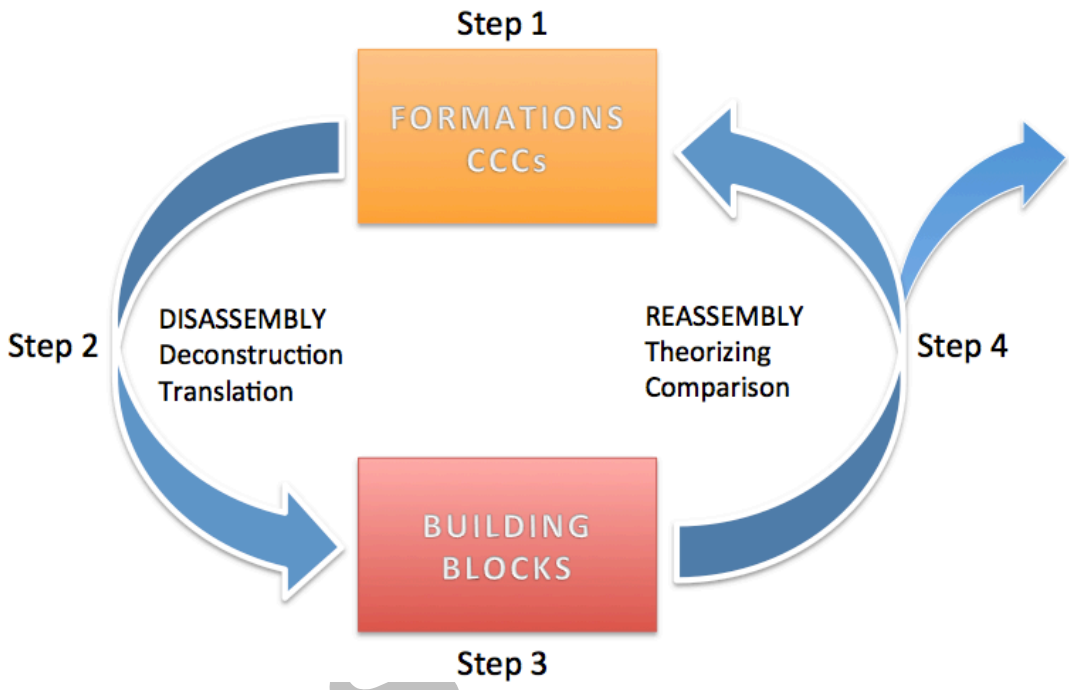

Fig. 1: The reverse engineering research process.

Step 3 and 4 may be less familiar to humanists, but they, too, can be put in very simple terms. Step 3 entails reading up on what colleagues are doing in different (lower-level) disciplines and translating one's own problems into language that makes sense in that literature. This is, in fact, a form of "best practice" for anyone who takes interdisciplinarity really seriously and plays by the rules of what I call the "endoxic principle" (Asprem 2014b, 84-86). Finally, the constructive *reassembly* stage is where we develop new theory and design research programs that reconnect the lower levels with the cultural and set up new comparisons between formations. Reassembling the complex, socially embedded wholes from a set of building blocks, then, does *not* guarantee a return to the old labels and categorizations with which we originally set out.

Instead, now describing and systematizing the subject matter from below, it provides us with an alternative way of relating "thick descriptions" of particulars with explanatory theory and comparative methods in a broad interdisciplinary context. As such, the BBA may well represent a remedy against the feared slow "death by area studies" (Hughes and Warne 2013).

2.3 *How to Do It: Lessons from "Gnosticism," "magic," and "religion"*

No CCC is exactly alike; different methods are appropriate for different cases. It matters, for example, whether we are reverse-engineering a CCC that an academic formation is using as analytic, "etic" terminology, or an "emic" concept that scholars claim merely to describe. It also matters what sort of phenomena the CCC is conceived to represent in the formation it is used (that is, its semantic *extension*): does it stand for ideas, practices, persons, historical currents, beings, identities, experiences, metaphysical entities, objects, abstract relations, places, values, utterances, a combination of these, or something else entirely? We can illustrate how such differences make a difference by looking at three examples of CCCs that have been the subject of a form of constructive deconstruction along the lines I recommend for the disassembly phase of the reverse engineering process.

Consider, for example, Michael Allen Williams' (1996) argument with regard to Gnosticism. Williams saw his book not only as a "case study in the construction of categories in the study of religions", but, more specifically, "in how a category can become more an impediment than an expedient to understanding" (Williams 1996, xii). Gnosticism is a second-order category, never used by those categorized as "gnostics", that presumably refers to a historically grounded set of movements, texts, and practices. The coherence of this set, however, has more to do with the imagination of heresiologists than with a unity in the textual corpus itself. Throughout his book, Williams' line of argumentation aimed to show how careful investigation of specific sources undermines the generalizations that have been made about them. While this exercise amounted to an argument for dismantling the category (see ibid., 264-265), Williams was not content to leave it at that: he also suggested new ways of categorizing the material. Thus, he introduced "biblical deimurgical myths" as a

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typological construct that allows scholars to focus on one clearly identifiable trait of many sources formerly known as "Gnostic", while also allowing for comparisons with other, "non-Gnostic" datasets. Williams moreover recommended separating different mythological and cosmological building blocks from each other: thus, the presence of a demiurge does not automatically entail "anticosmism", but instead allows the researcher to study the diverging attitudes to the cosmos attested in the full set of demiurgical myths, and compare it with other sorts of material where anticosmism and demiurgical myths occur either together or individually (ibid., 96-115). Deconstruction is here followed by the development of more generic terminology, which in turn opens up new comparative opportunities.[3]

Another and more recent example of a deconstruction that leads to new categorizations is found in Michael Stausberg and Bernd-Christian Otto's (2013) argument that "magic" should be broken up into a number of more basic families of concepts, which they call "patterns of magicity". Stausberg and Otto could not adopt Williams' procedure of looking for simple characteristics in a well-defined set of sources, however; for "magic", there is no such thing. Instead, starting from a recognition that "magic" is above all a scholar's construct, they took influential scholars' definitions as their *primary data*, identified the basic elements of definitions that appeared in this dataset, and produced an inventory of 35 basic elements (ibid., 9-10) featured in the definitions.

Otto and Stausberg resisted the common temptations to adopt "the best" definition, stipulate a new one, or strive to harmonize traits with reference to a polythetic "family-resemblance". Instead, they proceeded to "split the extended tribal family into a number of nuclear families". This represents a distinct and significant shift in focus towards a systematic effort of classifying the sort of issues that scholars writing about "magic" have in fact been interested in when using that contested term. Acknowledging that the concept itself is highly ambiguous and problematic (i.e., a CCC), Stausberg and Otto recognizes that there are nevertheless real issues – actions, objects, processes – that scholars have been concerned with when using this term. Thus, they propose to code and

[3] See Lundhaug 2010 for another admirable approach to "Gnostic" material that is quite in line with the bottom-up cognitive perspective advocated here. Unfortunately, space restricts me from discussing it in any detail in the present publication.

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classify different senses of "magic", distinguishing, for example, the concept of "magic as word efficacy"(M_{WOR}) from "magic as signs" (M_{SIG}) and "magic as harmful rituals" (M_{HAR}). This exercise enables scholars to identify basic ascriptions and look for their combinations in various real-life constellations as well as in scholar definitions.

Stausberg and Otto's work with "magic" comes close to the approach that I advocate. The BBA, however, is not only interested in analysing and categorizing previous approaches, but also in phrasing those interests in terms of cognitive and psychological building blocks that afford possibilities for new vistas of research. The nuclear families of "magic", then, can be seen as *attributional composites* that can still be disaggregated further and translated into basic concepts.

We can find an elaborate model for how to do this in Taves' (2015) illustration of how to reverse-engineer the category "religion". Like Stausberg and Otto's work on magic, Taves focuses on etic definitions of "religion" as found within scholarly formations. She systematizes the literature and identifies some core definitional traditions ("nuclear families") that operationalize the term in different ways. Taves discusses three groups of definitions, focused on "the sacred" (e.g., Durkheim), "meaning and ultimate value" (e.g., Tillich), and "spiritual beings"/"gods"/" entities" (e.g., Tylor and contemporary CSR approaches to "MCI agents"), showing how each of these clusters can be translated into *attributional form*: They specify an *attribute* ("sacred", "ultimate", "counter-intuitive") and attach these to *generic elements* or *processes* (e.g. places, objects, values, hypothetical entities and beings). Earlier scholars' focus on "the sacred" can, for example, be redescribed in terms of generic processes of *setting things apart*. In cognitive terms, the basis of recognizing something as "set apart" or "special" is to perceive *salience*. This opens new vistas of research that challenge the standard social-science view that socially constructed distinctions are *arbitrary*: our evolved sensory and cognitive apparatus already put constraints on what is salient to *homo sapiens* (e.g. Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby eds. 1992). Moving objects stand out from still ones, and self-propelled biological movement stands out from inert movement. Humans stand out from other animals, faces stand out from other body parts, and eyes stand out from the rest

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of the face. Similar principles apply for other sensory modalities, including audition, olfaction, and gustation. In the reassembly phase, this insight helps explaining cross-cultural similarities in what types of objects, people, natural features, entities, or groups tend to be treated as "special". But most importantly, it enables comparisons with constructions of specialness that are *not* deemed "religious" (Taves 2013a, 2013b).

3. Reverse-Engineering "Esotericism"

3.1 *Step One: Locating a CCC in Its Formations*

Esotericism is, as any other CCC, an abstract noun with unstable meanings that shift both within and between formations. Considered globally – that is, across all formations in which the term is deployed – there is no agreement on the term's extension. Common dictionary definitions would have it apply to any difficult-to-learn subject matter, or to any secretive organization, while historians of esotericism generally restrict it to a set of historical currents in European intellectual history (cf. Asprem 2014a). The first step of the reverse engineering process is to locate some of these formations and map the discursive networks through which the term has emerged. Luckily, scholars of esotericism have already done most of this work through a decade of critiquing the category. I will briefly discuss four existing approaches that are particularly helpful to this stage: Kennet Granholm's (2013) discourse-analytical approach to "discourses on the esoteric"; Monika Neugebauer-Wölk's (2013) *Begriffsgeschichte*; Michael Bergunder's (2010) notion of esotericism as an "empty signifier"; and Wouter J. Hanegraaff's (2012) genealogical approach to "rejected knowledge".[4] Together, these tools may help us focus on the diverse elements that get inscribed in

[4] Some readers might find it surprising that I do not include von Stuckrad's work (e.g. 2005, 2010) in this discussion. The reason is simple: while von Stuckrad works with a discursive framework rooted in Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge (see especially von Stuckrad 2013, 2014), he does not, in fact, interrogate the concept(s) of "esotericism" from that perspective. Instead, von Stuckrad stipulates a new definition of "esoteric discourse", which he uses as an analytic tool *for doing* discursive analysis of various fields of knowledge (picking out structural elements regarding claims to higher knowledge). I do, however, include von Stuckrad's influential (typological) definition in section 3.2 below.

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emerging socio-cultural formations as "esoteric". Readers should bear in mind that this stage is *not* concerned with *defining* esotericism, but with analyses of word use that point us towards the various formations in which such definitions have been produced, and why.

The appropriate framework for step one is summed up in Granholm's call for an analysis of the global "discourse on the esoteric" – that is, of all enunciative acts that create meanings around this term.[5] This approach helps us see how scholars, practitioners, and other public spokespersons are *co-creators* of the CCC: scholars take over practitioners' self-understandings or polemicists' constructs, while scholarship becomes a valuable commodity among self-identifying esotericists (examples in Asprem and Granholm 2013; Granholm 2014, 197-199; von Stuckrad 2014, 139-177). Thus, we notice that the frequency of the term "esotericism" in the English language has increased dramatically in the wake of the professionalization of scholarship on esotericism (see Fig. 2). This is an effect we see with other related CCCs as well. "Shamanism," for example, would not have existed as a contemporary religious phenomenon were it not for scholars like Eliade, Castaneda, and Harner (Znamenski 2007). In the case of "Gnosticism," the Los Angeles-based Ecclesia Gnostica can turn to the Nag Hammadi library for holy texts and rely on contemporary Gnosticism scholars as their exegetes.[6] These sorts of analyses, in short, break down the distinction between emic and etic, insider and outsider, as it traces the development and transmission of meanings across different (academic and non-academic) formations.

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[5] And thus not to be confused with analytical operationalizations of "esoteric discourse" (e.g. von Stuckrad 2005, 2010, 2014).

[6] On their website, the Ecclesia Gnostica recommends the works of Elaine Pagels, Bentley Layton, Giovanni Filoramo, Ioan Couliano and others. http://gnosis.org/gnscript.html (accessed August 7, 2014).

Fig. 2: "Esotericism" 1-gram, 1800-2008. The graph indicates an exponential growth coinciding with the professionalization of esotericism as a field of research in the 1990s. Retrieved from Google nGram Viewer, January 28, 2015.

The groundbreaking research of Monika Neugebauer-Wölk and her colleagues must be the starting-point of any discussion of the emergence of "esotericism" as a category (see overview in Neugebauer-Wölk 2013). Focusing strictly on the transmission of terminology related to esoteric/esotericism (as distinguished from *concepts* that may go under a variety of terms, or none at all), Neugebauer-Wölk has been able to demonstrate German word forms that push the origin of the noun back half a century from what was previously thought. The earliest known current use appears with the German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), who, in a work on the "ancient mysteries" dated 1776, distinguishes "Esoterismus" from "Exoterismus" (ibid, 51). More importantly, "Esoterismus", "Esoterik", and even the identity marker "Esoteriker" ("esotericist") are all found in German publications of the late 18th century (ibid., 41-43, 51-58). What is astonishing is that the meanings attached to these terms already cover many of the areas later historians have picked up on, especially a concern with narratives of "ancient wisdom" (*philosophia perennis*), "the mysteries", and – significantly – high-degree Freemasonry (ibid., 41-42, 71-72). This suggests that the term already started to stabilize as a historical category and a signifier of religious identity during the Enlightenment.

Bergunder's (2010) theoretical work on esotericism as an "empty signifier" (cf. Laclau 1994) can helpfully supplement Neugebauer-Wölk's careful philological work, and aid our understanding of how the CCC relates to constructions of identity. Bergunder urges us to "consistently historicise the

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definition of esotericism" (2010, 11) by casting it as a marker of identity attributed to "a certain discourse related to religion and scholarship" (ibid., 19). The signifier is *empty* in the sense that it does not pick out a stable feature in the world. Instead, it functions as an identity marker by being deployed in relation to *other* available identities (e.g. "Christian", "exoteric", "secular", "atheist", "scientific", "Buddhist", "socialist, "traditional", "modern") in a differential play of signifiers internal to a given discourse. The empty signifier is simply a "contingent nodal point" that temporarily provides "the fixing of a contentious power discourse" (ibid.: 26). This allows us to theorize how the term can shift between naming an out-group or an in-group as a result of polemical and apologetic encounters, a dynamic that Neugebauer-Wölk also observed.

Here we should bridge to Hanegraaff's (2012) genealogical approach to esotericism as "rejected knowledge", which gives some historical meat to Bergunder's theoretical bone. In contrast to the terminological focus on specific word forms, Hanegraaff essentially conducts a problem history (*Problemgeschichte*) that takes seriously the *conceptual* structures that are deemed "problematic" in given historical contexts (see Asprem 2014b, 544-546; Hanegraaff 2013b). In excavating the sediments of problematic areas of discourse, he comes to see "esotericism" as a primarily *negative* category formation, resulting from the concern of Reformation theologians and Enlightenment scholars with notions like "paganism", "heresy", "superstition", "irrationality", "enthusiasm", and "magic". However, Hanegraaff also demonstrates that the rejection process instigated by Protestant and Counter-Reformation theologians did not proceed at random: *specific* theological and epistemological positions were excluded, in effect structuring the scope of the category that emerged from these processes. The positions in question have deeper genealogical roots in what Hanegraaff calls the "Platonic Orientalism" of the Church fathers and the Renaissance Neoplatonists: positions, in short, that sought to harmonize Christian doctrine with "pagan" philosophy and theurgic practices, often through an appeal to perennial wisdom (*philosophia perennis*) or a pristine revelation (*prisca theologia*). The implication is (as Neugebauer-Wölk also suggests) that the largely polemical signifier may not have been as empty as Bergunder claims, and the fixations of its discourses not quite as temporary.

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More importantly, Hanegraaff lays bare some of the deeper conceptual developments that undergirded the category formation in terms of "Esoterismus"/"Esoterik" that Neugebauer-Wölk and colleagues have uncovered. The concept, it seems, predates the term.

Together, these discursive approaches point us to specific clusters of ideas and practices that have laid the basis for later conceptualizations of "esotericism" (cf. Asprem 2014b, 543-551). These include theological and worldview positions that deny a strict separation of god and world (e.g. cosmotheism, panentheism), notions of an ageless wisdom that can be comprehended with special hermeneutic strategies, and epistemological attitudes emphasizing radical experiential knowledge (e.g., "gnosis"). These tendencies have birthed a number of powerful but diverging *prototypes* of what "esotericism" is all about (Hanegraaff 2013a, 3-12), which generated a set of formations on the outskirts of the academy in the 20th century, such as the Eranos circle (Hanegraaff 2012, 257-367; cf. Hakl 2013). The latest of these is the disciplinary formation known as "the academic study of Western esotericism" – institutionalized over the last few decades through specialist university chairs, academic scholarly societies, peer-reviewed journals, book series, and international conferences. On the level of scholarship, then, these deep discursive processes have lead to the emergence of distinct clusters of definitions that will soon require our full attention.

3.2 *Step 2: What Do Scholars Mean by "Esoteric"? Disassembling the CCC*

On delimiting the dataset

In step two we are narrowing the scope to a very specific, local segment of the broader "discourse on the esoteric", linked to the institutional dispositives of academic scholarship (academic journals, publishing houses, book series, conferences, etc.). Our guiding questions in step two are: What do scholars of esotericism mean by "esoteric"? What are the *de facto* objects of research that they devote their time studying under this heading? Is there any shared concern hidden behind diverging definitional traditions, and can we capture it in more generic language?

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We have learned in step one that "esotericism"/"esoteric" belongs to a much broader semantic field where other terms – such as occult/occultism, gnosis/Gnosticism, pagan/paganism, hermetic/Hermeticism, even mystic/mysticism – frequently appear as cognates. Even when we limit ourselves to scholarly literature that uses the exact *terms* "esotericism" and "esoteric" (thus excluding scholarship that uses presumed cognates), the literature remains abundant and divergent. For example, a database search in Academic Search Complete retrieved 1221 titles that include the term "esotericism" between 1951 and 2014, of which 760 were journal articles and 461 book reviews.[7] Digital data mining techniques could potentially tell us a lot about the semantic webs of "esoteric/ism" in this broader literature. However, our present concerns are much more limited. Taking the same strategy as Williams did for Gnosticism, we are interested in a very specific subset of the academic discourse on the esoteric. In what follows, then, I am selecting definitional and theoretical work from that much more limited scholarly formation which uses the CCC to define its identity *vis-à-vis* other scholarly formations. I include the work of people who have contributed to the main journals in the field, published textbooks and introductions, tackled the definitional issue in peer-reviewed journal articles, or been involved with scholarly organizations such as the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) and the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE).

Attributional Analysis: Esotericism as "special knowledge"

There is still much disagreement on how to define the subject matter even within this limited field. We may, however, try and discern whether there are not, after all, some common families of *scholarly objects* that these different approaches have sought to address, disregarding the particular, idiosyncratic framework each scholar may have deployed to talk about it and their motivations for doing so. We can do this by adopting an attributional analysis modeled on Taves' method, discussed above, for teasing apart attributes and generic elements in

[7] Search performed on June 27, 2014.

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definitions of "religion". What are the generic processes, entities, or objects that the adjective "esoteric" modulates?

The domain of "esoteric things" is, in fact, much more limited than the domain of things deemed "religious". People talk about "religious values", "religious experience", "religious buildings", and "religious people", while phrases like "esoteric values", "esoteric experience", "esoteric buildings" or "esoteric people" are hardly in use, much less operationalized in technical definitions. So what kinds of things can be "esoteric"? To measure more precisely what "esoteric" governs in a representative scholarly corpus, I subjected the flagship *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (*DG&WE*; Hanegraaff et al. 2005) to an attriutional analysis that teases apart uses of the adjective "esoteric" from the nouns and noun phrases to which it is attached. With its 344 entries written by 147 contributors, the *DG&WE* is still the most comprehensive state-of-the-art publication in the field.[8] While this method does not tell us anything about what these authors think about the *specificity* of "the esoteric", it gives us important insight into the *generic* domains in which "esotericism" is seen to mark out a distinguishable subset.

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[8] Although it must be mentioned that the great amount of new studies and theoretical progress since publication in 2004 renders the *DG&WE* in need of update. Nevertheless, the nature of such an update, which would include new geographical areas and time periods, means that it is not necessarily going to cause a big difference in the way the term "esoteric" is employed.

Categories	Concepts	*n.*	*percent* of total
KNOWLEDGE		**327**	42.4%
	Ideas/thoughts	75	
	teachings/doctrines	73	
	meaning/interpretation	60	
	knowledge	40	
	disciplines	18	
	symbolism	16	
	truth	11	
	History/Historiography	11	
	sciences	8	
	wisdom	7	
	worldview	5	
	Mentality/mode of thought	3	
TRAJECTORIES		**195**	25.3%
	traditions	102	
	currents	70	
	contexts	12	
	culture	2	
	schools	7	
	transmission	2	
SOCIAL FORMATIONS		**108**	14.0%
	Groups	77	
	People/roles	31	
LITERATURE		**85**	11.0%
	literature	75	
	discourse	10	

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RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY	**26**	3.4%
religion	25	
spirituality	1	
EXPERIENCE & PRACTICE	**25**	3.2%
practice	19	
experience	6	
ART	**5**	0.6%
PLACES	**1**	0.1%

Table 1: Attributional analysis of "esoteric" in DG&WE: Table of categories and concepts.

I used an electronic search to locate every single instance of the adjective "esoteric" in the *Dictionary* (*n*=772), and adopted a coding and classification process inspired by grounded theory (cf. Engler 2011) in order to analyze the types of noun phrases associated with the term.[9] This analysis revealed a strong prevalence for "esoteric" appearing with noun phrases related to epistemic concepts (Table 1). Out of the 772 uses of "esoteric" that could be clearly identified as attributes to a noun or noun phrase, 42.4% (327 instances) were connected to terms related to the category of "knowledge": Thus we find talk about esoteric *teachings*, esoteric *ideas* and *thought*, esoteric *doctrines*, esoteric *meanings* and *interpretations*, esoteric *wisdom* and *truth*, esoteric *symbolism*, and esoteric *disciplines* and *sciences*. The second largest category (25.3%) of nouns deemed "esoteric" were ones referring to various forms of historical continuity or trajectories: thus, esoteric *traditions*, esoteric *currents*, esoteric *contexts*, *cultures*, and *schools* are all frequently used. Third we have nouns that refer to specific forms of social formations (14%), such as esoteric *orders*, *groups*, *milieus*, and *movements*, or to social roles, such as esoteric *teachers*, *disciples*, *authors*, *authorities* and *priesthoods*. 11% of all instances referred to forms of literature, such as esoteric *books*, *pamphlets*, *internet sites*, *texts*, and *sources*, while only 3.4% attached the term to nouns related to "religion" and "spirituality", such as "esoteric Christianity", "esoteric Buddhism" or "esoteric Judaism" (these were

[9] Repetitions (as in subtitles) and book titles were deleted along with instances that did not function clearly as an attribute to a noun phrase. Details about the coding procedure can be obtained upon request.

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also the only three religious nouns for which this adjective was used). Finally, only 3.2% of the instances referred to forms of practice (*rituals*, *ceremonies*, *work*) or experience (*visions*, *revelations*, *gnosis*) as being "esoteric".

This analysis suggests that for scholars, "*esotericism" concerns special kinds of knowledge, and the social formations, material means, practices, and experiences through which this knowledge is developed, taught, implemented and transmitted*. What, precisely, makes knowledge *special* according to these scholars (and to the subjects they study) is a question that this semi-quantitative analysis does not answer. One author may refer to a group as "esoteric" because it keeps knowledge *secret*, another might find a discourse "esoteric" because it concerns a claim to "higher" knowledge, while a text may be deemed "esoteric" simply for being obscure. In order to get from the generic domain that scholars are interested in ("knowledge") to the specific features of "specialness" that they have in mind, we need to take a closer, *qualitative* look at the most influential definitions.

Definitional Clusters: What Makes Knowledge "Special"?

While the literature on how to define esotericism has grown since the early 1990s, it is still small enough to allow a representative sample to be compiled without resorting to complicated parameters for inclusion.[10] Drawing inspiration from Stausberg and Otto's work on "magic", I propose that we can distinguish roughly between five major clusters of specialness that appear in the literature on "esotericism":

- Knowledge that is *hidden* or *kept secret*;
- Knowledge that is based on a special *form of thought* or *way of thinking*;

[10] Thus, I am basing my sample on the simple criteria that the author/text 1) operationalizes the term "esoteric/ism"; 2) makes an *original* (i.e., not simply adopting someone else's definition) and *deliberate* attempt at theorization and/or definition of that term; and 3) addresses it to the formation of esotericism studies by interacting with its key journals, book series, or other key institutions. The following sources have been consulted for the present qualitative analysis: Bergunder 2010; Faivre 1994, 2000, 2010; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Granholm 2013; Hanegraaff 1995, 2001, 2008, 2012, 2013b; Neugebauer-Wölk 2003, 2010, 2013; Pasi 2008; von Stuckrad 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2010; Urban 1997, 1998; Versluis 2002, 2007.

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- Knowledge that is claimed to be *higher* or *absolute*;
- Knowledge that is justified with reference to *special experiences*;
- Knowledge that has been *rejected*, *marginalized*, or *suppressed*.

In simplified notation, we can refer to these clusters as ESO_{SEC} (esotericism as secrecy), ESO_{FOT} (esotericism as form of thought), ESO_{ABS} (esotericism as absolute/higher knowledge), ESO_{GNO} (esotericism as "*gnosis*"/experiential knowledge), and ESO_{HET} (esotericism as heterodoxy/rejected knowledge).

Please note that these shorthand notations are offered merely as a convenient way of carving up the field of existing scholar definitions, which must then be disassembled further (see 3.3 below).[11] Moreover, these are not *exclusive* categories. Individual scholars frequently refer to several of these senses when defining what "esoteric" knowledge is all about.[12] There may even be good reasons to think that some of the features are *likely* to occur together in the world. For example, a personal revelatory event (ESO_{GNO}) may result in knowledge considered absolute (ESO_{ABS}), and this knowledge may be institutionalized in an initiatory society based on structured secrecy (ESO_{SEC}). Moreover, the surrounding society may consider this knowledge objectionable and "heterodox" (ESO_{HET}) for any number of reasons, from the theological to the moral to the political or the scientific.

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[11] Thus I also ask my readers not to give too much weight to the specific terms used for these clusters. For example, I use "gnosis" for the experience cluster not because I advocate it as a viable etic term (I don't), but because it frequently takes this role in the literature under review (i.e. Hanegraaff 2008, Versluis 2002, 2007). See my discussion in section 3.3 below for an attempt to render these problematic clusters in basic concepts and relate them to lower-level building blocks.

[12] For a recent study that invokes all of the above meanings in its discussion of what "esotericism" is about, see Djurdjevic 2014.

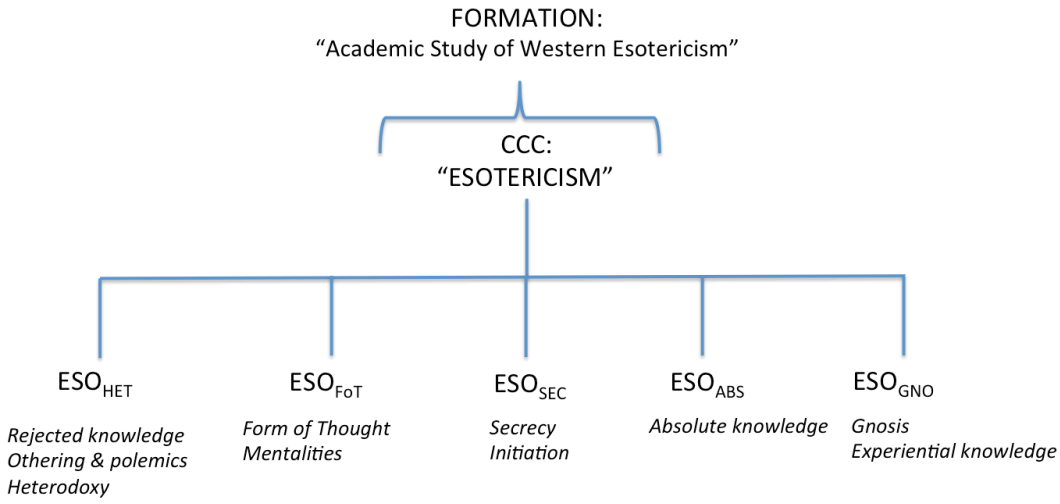

Fig. 3: Five definitional clusters of esotericism as "special knowledge".

It is intriguing, then, to note that explicit attempts to define and delimit "esotericism" as a scholarly object tend to focus on one or two of these components, while others elements are subsumed, or derived from, the stipulated core. For example, Kocku von Stuckrad defines "the esoteric" as a *discursive* element centered on "claims of higher or perfect knowledge" (2010, 60-61), but this leads him to identify "two specific modes of gaining access to perfect knowledge – mediation and experience" (ibid., 63). ESO_{ABS} is here discursively linked to ESO_{GNO} in the form of exceptional "experiences" involving the "mediation" of spirit entities, ascents of the soul, astral travel and the like. But it is also linked to a discourse of secrecy (ESO_{SEC}), because "the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses" (ibid., 61, emphases removed). Similarly, Hanegraaff finds that the only thing currents classified as "esoteric" really have in common is that they have "been set apart by mainstream religious and intellectual culture as the 'other' by which it defines its own identity" (ESO_{HET}); however, this alterity was constructed not only by identifying deviating *doctrine*, but also deviating ways of obtaining or justifying it – namely through private revelatory experiences (ESO_{GNO}) (Hanegraaff 2013b, 13-14, cf. Hanegraaff 2012, 106-107, 115-116). Arthur Versluis, holding up an understanding of ESO_{GNO} at the core of his definition ("gnosis" as "knowledge of hidden or invisible realms or aspects of existence") also emphasizes a secondary

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element of ESO_{SEC} in that "knowledge is either explicitly restricted to a relatively small group of people, or implicitly *self-restricted* by virtue of its complexity or subtlety (Versluis 2007, 2, emphasis added). Antoine Faivre, too, in his influential definition of esotericism as a "form of thought", connects up with a general discussion of elements of secrecy (1994, 32-33) as well as "gnosis" (ibid., 19-23), pointing out the relevance of these aspects while subsuming them to the, in his view, more important delineation of a specific mentality expressed through a range of cultural products.

This brief discussion indicates that some of the elements connect in similar ways across definitions. I suggest that we might want to switch our focus here, and see this clustering *not* simply as arbitrary similarities between different (stipulative) definitions, but rather as a robust *discovery* of the academic study of esotericism. If we do that, our theoretical ambition must be to *explain* why we see this clustering of "experiential gnosis", "esoteric mentality", "heterodoxy", "secrecy", and claims to "absolute knowledge". The discursive and genealogical analyses discussed earlier must no doubt form an important part of such an explanation, but only in terms of how phenomena bearing these traits have been classified (top down) and counted as evidence for "esotericism". It does not explain the (bottom up) underlying relationships between discourse-independent realities on top of which such classifications are built. The final two steps of the reverse engineering process prepare us for pursuing this explanatory ambition.

3.3 *Steps 3 and 4: Basic Concepts and Building Blocks of "Special Knowledge"*

I have argued that the implicit research objects of esotericism scholarship can be rendered in generic terms as processes of producing and setting aside certain forms of knowledge as "special". While I have systematized the literature and broken it down into thematic clusters, I still have not said anything about the building blocks underlying these processes. To do that, we still need to translate the definitional clusters into basic concepts that can mediate between the cultural, behavioral, and cognitive levels. In what follows, I will discuss three related concepts that can help us restructure the study of "special knowledge"

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from a cognitive angle: REPRESENTATION/METAREPRESENTATION, EVENT, and ACTION (Table 2).

Basic concept	Research questions	CSR theories	Useful references
REPRESENTATION + METAREPRESENTATION	How is "esoteric knowledge" constructed and transmitted? What makes it "special"? Secrecy; heterodoxy; "higher knowledge".	Epidemiology of representations; MCI theory; theological incorrectness.	Sperber 1996 Mercier and Sperber 2011 Boyer 2001 Barrett 2008
ACTION	How is special knowledge integrated in ritual action sequences? "Magical" ritual, "occult practice".	Ritual form theory; modes theory; action representation; event segmentation theory; cognitive resource depletion.	McCauley & Lawson 2002 Whitehouse 2004 Sørensen 2007a, 2007b Schjoedt et al. 2013
EVENT	How is experiential "gnosis" produced, and what are the factors determining its interpretation?	Event cognition; predictive coding; inner sense cultivation.	Radvansky & Zacks 2014 Taves & Asprem in press; Andersen et al. 2014; Luhrmann et al. 2010.

Table 2: Esotericism as Special Knowledge: Table of Basic Concepts and Research Programs

Special knowledge as METAREPRESENTATION

The concept of "knowledge" itself carries heavy philosophical baggage, but it can be rendered in the more generic terminology of representations and metarepresentations. The study of how minds produce mental representations (of objects, situations, hypotheticals, selves, other minds, etc.) has been of fundamental importance to the cognitive sciences (e.g. Fodor 1975, 1981). Moreover, how (private) mental representations relate to *public* representations (signs, narratives, behaviors, artifacts, etc.) that are shared in groups is one of the central questions of cognitive approaches in anthropology and the study of religion (e.g. Sperber 1996; Boyer 2001). Analysis in terms of (private and public) representations and metarepresentations (that is, representations about other representations) allows cognitive scientists to study how people and groups construct "knowledge", and to distinguish a number of different pathways in the construction and transmission process.

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For example, some representations are acquired *intuitively*, and remain relatively stable across cultures (e.g., classifications of colors and animals; Berlin 1978; Berlin and Kay 1969), whereas others are held *reflectively*, and tend to vary a great deal across populations and cultures (cf. Sperber 1996). This variation is explained by the fact that particularly complex and unintuitive representations require a sophisticated capacity for metarepresentational processing to be successfully spread and hence sustained in a culture (Mercier and Sperber 2011; cf. Sperber ed. 2000). For example, minds will not intuitively form representations like "God is three persons in one" or "$E=mc^2$" simply by interacting with the world. Instead, they require communicative practices that allow learners to store what they do not themselves immediately understand in metarepresentational schemas. In short, metarepresentations allow arguments to authority, which, despite their reputation, are crucial to all cultural learning. Thus, a student might start to learn about mass-energy equivalence though representations like these:

"physicists are trustworthy" (representation)
"physicists *say that* $E=mc^2$" (metarepresentation)
"whatever it means, it is probably true that $E=mc^2$" (metarepresentation)

What is important to us here is that seeing individual representations (such as a doctrine, text, symbol, artifact, or action sequence) as constituting "superstition", "knowledge", "heresy", "absolute truth", or "secrets", are all made possible by linking the representation to particular metarepresentations. They gain their distinctiveness from how they are stored. Thus, *whatever else* may be involved, constructing and setting knowledge apart as "special" *also* involves metarepresentations. We can use this insight to connect the theoretical literature on esotericism to computational theories in CSR, such as Sperber's (1996) epidemiology of representations, research on the formation of "god concepts" (Boyer 2001; Barrett 2003), the relation between intuitive and reflective beliefs in the phenomenon of "theological incorrectness" (Barrett 1999; Slone 2004), and so forth. However, while much CSR research in this area has focused on what characterizes culturally successful religious and mythological

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representations – most notably in terms of the theory of minimally counterintuitive (MCI) representations (Boyer 2001; Barrett 2008; Barrett, Burdett and Porter 2009; cf. Asprem in press) – the study of esoteric representations would, I suggest, be best served by focusing primarily on *metarepresentational* features. This seems especially pertinent for the clusters focusing on secrecy, heterodoxy, and absolute knowledge – each of which designate particular forms of metarepresentations that can be theorized to have particular consequences for the way the associated representation is embedded socially and transmitted in a population. For example, ESO_{HET} and ESO_{ABS} both give primary focus to (discursive) authority structures that envelope and structure the evaluation and transmission of individual representations rather than on the content of the representations themselves ("this is dangerous knowledge!" "this is superior to anything else you have learned!"). In the case of ESO_{SEC} we may study how different metarepresentational arrangements restrict the transmission of representations (in the case of institutionalized secrecy in some initiatory orders), but also (and much more interestingly) on how secret meanings may be *inferred* in encounters with obscure representations or the absence of expected representations (e.g., knowledge revealed gradually in progressive initiation ceremonies; making sense of obscure texts or images by someone considered an authority). Moreover, we may hypothesize that metarepresentations that ascribe "hidden meaning" to poorly understood representations *increase* the chance of successful transmission of the secretive representation and drive new meaning-making processes. The story of how alchemy developed from an experimental physical discipline to *spiritual* alchemy with increasingly abstruse layers of allegorical meanings may be a promising test case for this line of analysis (cf. Principe 2012).

Ritual as ACTION

Clearly, (meta)representational processes do not cover all cognitive aspects of the phenomena previously categorized as part of "esotericism". The scope must be expanded to include practical and ritualistic dimensions, on the one hand, and experiential ones, on the other. To deal with "ritual", we need to introduce the concept of ACTION. There is already a substantial CSR literature that connects

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representational theory to ritual through action representation (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2000; cf. Nieblo and Sørensen 2013), focusing on cognitive aspects of ritual that appear to distinguish them as a proper subset of actions. CSR work on ritual has, for the most part, focused on collective rituals (exception: Sørensen 2007a; cf. Taves 2014) and their role in maintaining collectively shared representations (Whitehouse 2004; Schjoedt et al. 2013). Work on ritual in "esoteric" contexts will have to develop approaches that attend especially to ritual creativity and to solitary ritual.

Research on ritual action among the phenomena previously classified under the esotericism CCC may also shed light on the function of "special knowledge" within these action-structures. For example, building on Lawson and McCauley's (1990; 2002) ritual form hypothesis, we might distinguish ritual actions based on where in the action-representation system "special knowledge" is deployed: grimoire traditions (Davies 2008), for example, seem to involve special knowledge in the agent slot (the magician claiming it to bolster their ritual authority), as well as the instrument slot (using special languages or texts from a special provenance). Moreover, we may distinguish "esoteric" rituals based on whether they are *deploying* special knowledge somewhere in the action representation system, as in the previous example, or they are aiming to *obtain* such knowledge. Recent historical research suggest that ritual innovation in European ritual magic has been driven precisely by the interplay between deploying knowledge already considered special, and obtaining *new* knowledge as an effect of the ritual, which is then used to revise the action structure itself (Klaassen 2013; Asprem 2012). This is an intriguing dynamic of ritual innovation that cries out for closer scrutiny from a CSR angle.

Experience as EVENT

Such work on ritual would have to connect to the experiential dimensions encoded in the ESO_{GNO} and ESO_{FOT} clusters. "Gnosis" is itself a CCC that we should reverse-engineer rather than adopt for analytical purposes. It covers a wide range of phenomenologically and etiologically distinct experiences that are given various attributions and appraisals. How do we connect the important *attributional* processes related to "claims of gnosis" (i.e., the subject's view of

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what caused the claimed experience and what it means) to the study of any *actual* experiences that people might refer to or hope to achieve?[13]

The literature on event cognition offers a promising angle for framing these problems (see Taves and Asprem in press; Radvansky and Zacks 2014). An "event" is defined simply as "a segment of time at a given location that is perceived by an observer to have a beginning and an end" (Zacks and Tversky 2001). Reframing the unruly category of "experiences" as "events" and approaching them from the perspective of how we process events in general (by segmenting incoming sensory information, constructing event models, deploying event schemata, etc.) provides ways to assesses several classic problems in the study of "religious experience", such as the relation between experience and narrative, the role of prior knowledge, and interactions with semantic and episodic memories, both in real-time event cognition and in post-hoc recounting of what happened. Importantly, the event cognition literature suggests that basic causal and intentional attributions emerge in the moment of event model construction (during "the experience"), rather than being attributed entirely post hoc through "interpretation". Event model analysis can thus help us explain how basic attributions are elaborated upon in socio-cultural formations (Taves and Asprem in press). Applying this approach to "gnosis events" where experience is tied to special knowledge gives us new ways to read narrative accounts, compare them to experience narratives labeled with other CCCs (e.g. "prophecy", "mysticism", "psychosis"), point to experimental work on how these experiences might be produced in specific settings, and how they end up being appraised in diverging ways in different formations.

Event cognition is embedded in a general theory of cognitive functioning known as hierarchical predictive coding (see Clark 2013), which holds that the brain is in the business of inferring the sources of its inputs. It does this by making top-down predictions about what happens in its environment,

[13] Assuming, of course, that there is no stable "core experience" that maps on one-to-one to particular experiential categories on the discursive level (Proudfoot 1975; Sharf 1998). For a recent collection of critiques of the contentious category of "religious experience", see Martin and McCutcheon eds. 2012. For constructive attempts to go beyond the constructionist impasse (on lines that I favor), see Taves 2009; Taves and Asprem in press.

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monitoring bottom-up sensory input for prediction errors, and updating the top-down predictions when the error signal increases. Since the top-down "prior probabilities" are partially due to learning (i.e., the outcomes of past experience), this framework offers clues to an experimental paradigm that targets the interaction of culturally based expectations with "surprising" bottom-up signals – whether these stem from anomalous neural activity (e.g. strokes, drug-induced manipulations) or environmental manipulations (e.g., sensory deprivation, sensory overload). Some promising experimental work has recently emerged along these lines (e.g. Andersen et al. 2014). Further research would do well to isolate some of the psychophysical and contemplative manipulations that historians and ethnographers of "esotericism" can attest to, such as the detailed manuals for "astral travel", "scrying", or communication with angels, and attempt to reproduce basic effects in the lab under different conditions of subjects' prior knowledge (cf. Taves and Asprem in press).

Final thoughts on an esoteric "mentality"

On the surface, the ESO_{FOT} cluster – which casts esotericism as a specific mentality – may appear the most relevant for cognitive and psychological approaches. In reality, however, it is also the most demanding and complex of the five. This is because the four "intrinsic" characteristics of the form of thought, as delineated by Faivre (1994, 2000) and frequently repeated since, are not formulated in sufficiently basic terms. Depending on how we choose to interpret characteristics such as "correspondences" and "mediation/imagination", we will be considering very different sorts of building blocks on the level of individual psychology. In short, we need more reverse engineering. Such a continued process (which I cannot engage fully here) will lead us to distinguish two types of building blocks for the ESO_{FOT} cluster – *universal cognitive dispositions* and dispositions of *personality- and individual difference* – which are, moreover, developed, calibrated, and combined in various ways through what we might call *learning dispositions*. I use the term "disposition" in order to emphasize that neither type relates *deterministically* to specific behavioral outcomes or culture-level phenomena. Thus, while the first type refers to broadly shared cognitive mechanisms and the second includes personality traits and pathologies, what

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they share, and what makes them relevant for our purposes, is that they create *dispositions* for the sort of outputs that scholars of a Faivrean bent might recognize as an "esoteric form of thought".

Consider, for example, the Faivrean characteristic of seeing elements in the world as connected through an invisible web of correspondences that can be utilized for classification (e.g., "natural objects pertinent to Mars"), magical operations (e.g., exploiting "sympathies" between the attributes of a planet and the attributes of a metal), and explanatory schemes (e.g., principles of likeness in Paracelsian medicine). What sort of mind is likely to produce such correspondences? Clearly, numerous pathways are possible. Domain-general cognitive processes like *conceptual blending* allow all normally functioning humans to integrate conceptual content across different domains by analogy, and compress these mappings into identity in blends (cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Far from constituting irrational and pseudoscientific "analogical reasoning" (Vickers 1984, 1988) or examples of "primitive thought" (Lévy-Bruhl 1923), such compressions are in fact key to normal mental operations, explaining how we create new concepts. In this sense, the *capacity* for linking knowledge in webs of correspondences is quite natural and universal.

However, there may also be other pathways to very similar ways of organizing one's experiences. To mention just one particularly striking example, there is an abundant literature that links schizotypal personality to a whole series of things that appear relevant to Faivre's characteristics: a greater propensity to detect patterns in ambiguous information or random noise (Type I errors), "magical ideation", proneness to over-attribute mental states and intentions (e.g. to non-intentional systems), and a proneness to experience sensory overrides (hallucinations) (for overviews and further references see Barnes and Gibson 2013, 44; Farias and Granqvist 2007; Day & Peters 1999; Wolfradt et al. 1999). This research may suggest schizotypy as a personality-level building block that makes some individuals more likely to develop what scholars might consider an "esoteric form of thought" than others.

Finally, both the broadly shared cognitive abilities and the individual differences come together in processes of learning. Consider, for example, the

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notion of "imagination"/"mediation" (Faivre 1994, 11-12).[14] We know that there are individual differences in people's capacity to form mental imagery (about 2-5% of the population cannot do it at all; Faw 2009; cf. Kosslyn, Thompson, and Ganis 2006). But on top of this, research on "mental imagery cultivation" (or "inner sense cultivation") shows that the basic capacity can be developed into a skill through training, which radically enhances the perceptual vividness of mental imagery (Noll 1985; Luhrmann and Morgain 2012). Furthermore, while all normally functioning humans possess evolved inferential modules such as Theory of Mind (which allows us to metarepresent the mental states of other people), cultural practices can affect how these modules are calibrated (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014; cf. Sperber 1996, 119-150). This process has been the focus of recent research into how culture may affect experiences that psychiatrists consider psychosis (Luhrmann et al. 2014), and how some evangelicals learn to hear (quite literally) the voice of God (2012). By learning to pay attention to one's own mental content and bodily signals in new ways, evolved inferential modules such as ToM can take these signals as inputs and generate new spontaneous appraisals that make one's own content seem as if it were caused by an external agent. Not everyone who goes through these learning processes succeed, however: there appears to be a correlation between the ability to rewire one's cognitive circuits to tune in to the voice of God and the personality trait absorption (Luhrmann, Nusbaum, & Thisted 2010; cf. Tellegen and Atkinson 1974) – emphasizing, once again, the intricate relation between universal dispositions (ToM), individual difference (absorption), and practice (imagery cultivation).

[14] I submit that "imagination", too, is a CCC that holds a great variety of meanings in different formations. Moreover, it lacks a clear and definite meaning in the cognitive science literature. We may distinguish between at least two meanings. One is the ability to form new concepts and perform operations with a variety of complex representations in the mind (i.e., the sort of "imagination" involved in Fauconnier and Turner's theory of conceptual blending). A second and narrower meaning is about the ability to form "mental imagery", which, in keeping with the predictive coding framework discussed above, are perception-like representations in any modality (auditory, visual, olfactory, tactile, gustatory) and are intrinsically tied to the perceptual system (see Clark 2014). In the present discussion, I focus on the second, narrower sense of imagination as "imagery".

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These recent findings also cast new light on Luhrmann's earlier work (1989) on how contemporary ritual magicians (the kind that belong to the English educated middle class) learn to experience "magic" as real. To the extent that one can truly learn to see and communicate with spirit beings, and come to experience the world through correspondence systems based on kabbalah, astrology, numerology and so forth, we should expect this ability to be constructed from the same building blocks as evangelicals use to commune with the divine. These are empirical hypotheses that CSR-oriented esotericism scholars can and should test.

4. Reassembling the Building Blocks of the Esoteric: Invitation to an Interdisciplinary Research Program

I hope to have shown that it is possible to translate the concerns of historical and ethnographic research programs into a language that allows us to come at them from the angle of lower-level disciplines, and that this can be done without losing sight of culture-level complexity or historical specificity. While my conclusions on the esotericism field as being concerned with processes of constructing and disseminating "special knowledge" are admittedly tentative, I hope that they offer concrete suggestions for future research that successfully integrates historical, social-scientific and cognitive research methods. This is, in other words, an invitation to help build an interdisciplinary research program that brings together two of the most exciting recent subdisciplines in the study of religion: CSR and the study of esotericism. In closing, I wish to say a few words about what accepting this invitation might mean for the esotericism field and its position within the study of religion. In short, what do we get when we reassemble the building blocks of the esoteric?

Reassembling the building blocks of a CCC does *not* provide a new stability to that concept which allows one to resume "business as usual" with renewed confidence; nor does it mean that the higher-level phenomena are completely dissolved into lower-level ones, which should from that moment on be considered the only proper level of investigation. This is another way of saying that the BBA is neither a form of "essentialism", nor of "reductionism", as

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those two terms are typically used in polemical boundary-skirmishes in the study of religion. Instead, what we can achieve by the reverse engineering process is to reconstitute the objects of study through *vertical* and *horizontal integration*.

Vertical integration (Tooby and Cosmides 1992) is achieved by linking our data and theoretical frameworks with explanatory theory on lower disciplinary levels, so that, at the very least, they are *coherent* with each other and allow translation of research problems from one level to the other. Such integration does not infringe on explanatory pluralism (McCauley 2013): historians are still encouraged to use explanatory language relevant to their level of analysis rather than misapplying e.g. biological explanations on a level where they make no sense.[15] That explanatory levels are vertically integrated means that, at the bare minimum, there will be nothing in the higher-level theorization that *conflicts with* what we know about lower-level processes. We will, for example, want to avoid making claims about a "form of thought" that violate information processing principles studied by cognitive science. Better yet, we should be able to build our own theories *on top of* established knowledge about such information processing principles. This has practical implications, for just as with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (Tooby and Cosmides 1992), explanatory models on the historical development of esotericism have occasionally included views on how people process information (e.g., the case of "occult analogy", or variations on Lévy-Bruhlian "participation") and how they learn and respond to socialization and internalization of doctrinal content (e.g., the notion of a "disenchantment of magic"; cf. criticism in Asprem 2014b) that simply do not stand to scrutiny. Working upwards from building blocks when we construct new theories helps us avoid errors that would make our colleagues cringe.

Vertical integration also makes possible new forms of *horizontal* integration, by which I mean the linking of data, problems, and methods of analysis with neighboring disciplines located at the *same* level. This is the sort of interdisciplinarity that esotericism scholars have already been good at

[15] In philosophical terms, then, I am rejecting *theory reduction* between these disciplines.

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encouraging, building bridges not only to religious studies, but to disciplines such as intellectual history, history of science, and art history. By breaking down CCCs that act as impediments to comparisons across these disciplines (e.g. between "esotericism", "religion", "science", or "art"), the methods discussed here open up vast new possibilities for boosting such horizontal integration. The three lines of research sketched in the previous part illustrate this: studying the metarepresentational processes involved with "esotericism" invites comparative approaches that look at the effects of, e.g., "heterodoxy" or "secrecy" in different cultural settings, from religion and science to politics and art. Embedding the study of "gnosis" in an event cognition framework invites a whole new way of comparing experiential accounts across cultures and formations (e.g. religious, psychiatric, recreational), and to enhance such comparative work with experimental studies. Studying the psychological affordances of learning to experience the world in particular ways opens the door for a wealth of comparative approaches where historians and ethnographers of esotericism have much to offer.

Accepting this invitation may lead esotericism scholars to think even more neurotically about how they conceptualize their object of study than they already do. It will most certainly require them to read more widely in less familiar literatures. However, the potential trade-offs are great: to rewire the field firmly at the center of the scientific study of religion and participate fully in the new era of discovery unleashed by the cognitive science of culture.

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