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Clairvoyance and Conceptualism: Rudolf Steiner's Higher Modes of Cognition as a Higher-Order Theory of Consciousness

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While it is widely accepted among scholars that mystical experiences are entirely culturally and/or linguistically constructed, in this article I argue that mystical experiences are distinct neuro-physiological events generated through a process of conceptual development. Rudolf Steiner's experiences of shifting into higher modes of cognition are interpreted as experiences of accessing the higher-order representations proposed by higher-order theories of consciousness. I suggest that clairvoyant perceptions and esoteric symbol systems may be representations of the distinctive phenomenology associated with higher-order representations, as predicted by higher-order perception theory. This article proposes that esoteric systems of spiritual development such as Steiner's are not arbitrary creations, but technical languages pertaining to the development of higher states and stages of consciousness. It is suggested that these esoteric systems may play an important role in the future if experiences of higher states and stages of consciousness become more widespread.

Keywords: Steiner; conceptualism; clairvoyance; cognitive; higher-order

Introduction

Over the last two decades researchers in the academic study of esotericism have shifted their methods away from primarily historical and sociological approaches and increasingly emphasise cognitive scientific explanations of esoteric phenomena (Asprem 2017: 1). The cognitive sciences include psychology, linguistics, anthropology, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, robotics and the philosophy of mind (Asprem and Davidsen 2017: 2). Scholars such as Sebastian Voros (2013) and Brian Lancaster (2005) have argued that the study of mystical traditions may provide useful insights for the cognitive sciences, as they include rich phenomenological descriptions and practices for experientially accessing preconscious cognitive processes (Voros 2013: 391-395). In this article I examine the mystical experiences of the Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) from the perspective of the cognitive sciences, with the aim of improving our understanding of the potentials of human cognition. Specifically, I will argue that higher-order theories of consciousness (Gennaro 2012, Lau 2008) offer models of our cognitive architecture that align with Steiner's teachings on the attainment of 'higher modes of cognition' (Hammer 2004: 423), claims that are further supported by neuroscientific research demonstrating the existence of distinct,

higher levels of consciousness (Schartner et al 2017: 1).

This approach remains uncommon in the academic study of religion. It is widely accepted among scholars in the field of religious studies that all religious or mystical experiences are entirely culturally and/or linguistically constructed (Shushan 2016: 73). Consequently, insights drawn from mystical experiences are commonly dismissed as nothing more than elaborations of the mystic's own belief system (Hammer 2004: 347). Yet this view is undermined by the fact that mystics with differing belief systems often report strikingly similar experiences, and secular thinkers with no religious conditioning have also been known to undergo spontaneous mystical experiences (Forman 1990: 20).

In the case of Rudolf Steiner, the limitations of the constructivist approach are particularly clear. As scholar Peter Staudenmeier writes, 'the explosion of creativity that marks Steiner's post-1900 esoteric works has no precedent in his earlier works. It is not just a sudden shift in tone and style and format, but a profound innovation in content' (2015: 106). Staudenmaier urges scholars to recognise these discontinuities in Steiner's thinking, arguing that efforts to harmonise Steiner's earlier and later work into one integrated whole fail to demonstrate the complexity of his thinking (2015: 98). The historian Helmut Zander (2007) has also emphasised the discontinuities of thought that appear in Steiner's work around the turn of the century. What happened to Steiner at the turn of the century? According to his autobiography, in 1899 'Rudolf Steiner had a distinct and life-transforming Christ-experience' (Bamford 1998: 15). This spiritual awakening inspired the core of his later teachings, based on 'the Mystery of Golgotha' (Steiner 1998: 48). With the transformative effect of this experience being so clearly evidenced in Steiner's writing and lecturing thereafter, it would seem that a cognitive scientific approach is needed to supplement the socio-cultural explanations for this sudden shift.

Those scholars of mysticism that have moved beyond the constructivist paradigm have often tended to limit their studies to mystical experiences of unity or emptiness (Forman 1990: 8), while excluding experiences of clairvoyant visions and encounters with divine beings such as are found throughout Steiner's writings. However, because both mystical states of emptiness and visionary experiences can often arise as a result of a single spiritual practice (Jones 2010: 4), this approach is ultimately unsatisfactory, and means that we still lack an explanatory model that can account for the wide range of reported mystical experiences. Rather than perpetuate this exclusionary approach, in the latter portion of this article I aim to show that the varieties of mystical experience are united in that they each depend upon a process of conceptual development that can take place either consciously or unconsciously. I argue that Steiner's work is important for its presentation of higher-order concepts that may be capable of advancing our collective culture towards higher levels of introspection, and aid in the creation of powerful new symbolic languages representative of an expanded and more inclusive sense of self.

1. The Varieties of Mystical Experience

Mysticism is a term that has been used to refer to a wide variety of extraordinary experiences reported by individuals throughout the centuries, from the visions of Julian

of Norwich or Mechthild of Magdeburg, to the states of emptiness sought through Zen meditation or discussed in the *Cloud of Unknowing* (1961). For the purposes of this article, the varieties of mystical experience can be divided into three main categories. The first two have been referred to by scholars Robert Forman (1990) and Richard H. Jones (2010) as introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences. The introvertive experience, also known as the depth-mystical experience (Jones 2010: 5), or the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) (Forman 1990: 8), is defined by Robert Forman as 'a wakeful, though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness' (1990: 8). Forman identifies the states of samadhi or mushinjo in zazen as examples of the PCE, which is characterised by as a state of awareness that is empty of phenomenal content, including thoughts or physical sensations. Extrovertive mysticism, which Richard H. Jones calls the 'mindfulness state of consciousness' is related to experiences of 'nature mysticism' or 'cosmic consciousness' (Jones 2010: 5), and is characterised by a sense of connectedness or unity to all that we experience (2010: 7).

Both authors exclude the visionary or ecstatic experiences of a Mother Theresa or Rudolf Steiner from their definitions of mysticism, which fits the purposes of their studies. Jones reminds us that often paranormal powers and ecstatic visions are regarded with suspicion by many mystical traditions, with mystical visions, sounds and sensations being rejected in Zen as 'demon states' (makyo) (2010: 5). However, such warnings also point to the fact that experiences of seemingly paranormal phenomena often inadvertently accompany the pursuit of introvertive and extrovertive mystical states through spiritual practice. Any attempt to develop an epistemological framework that accounts for the wide spectrum of possible mystical experiences will therefore be strengthened by including a consideration of these states, which will be referred to broadly as forms of 'extra-sensory mysticism' (ESM), in addition to those of extrovertive mysticism (EM) and introvertive mysticism (IM).

Steiner serves as a rare case study upon which to build this framework, since all three varieties of mystical experience are cultivated and explicitly described within his spiritual system. Examples of extrovertive mysticism are clearly evident in certain stages of his Rosicrucian Path, with Steiner stating that 'a feeling of oneness with the entire cosmos develops quite naturally', as 'our own organism expands into an organism that encompasses all of space...a sensation that is called godliness, or beatitude' (2000: 92). Steiner also guides his students toward an experience of introvertive mysticism, but Steiner regards this as a stage to be transcended through training, asserting that the lack of content experienced by students in this state is due to their lack of subtle perception or understanding of this new level of consciousness. According to Steiner, without undergoing training that develops our inner sense organs, freeing ourselves from all thoughts and physical sense impressions leads only to 'the ''nothingness'' of unconsciousness', experienced by a soul and spirit that 'has no tools for observing the spiritual world' (1997: 300). Finally, Steiner's writings are overflowing with examples of the third, extra-sensory form of mysticism, with such experiences becoming a part of everyday life for the new initiate, who begins 'to perceive realities and spiritual beings in the surroundings, just as we perceive the physical world through our physical senses' (1997: 306).

Having categorised the various forms of mystical experience, it is also worth briefly distinguishing what is meant by the term 'transcendent'. What is important here is that it is always an experience that is being discussed, and so philosophical issues relating

to dualism or non-physicality can be set aside. The 'transcendent perspective' referred to here represents a transcendence of one's previous modes of perception and cognition. If a chimpanzee was to suddenly experience a human mode of consciousness, for example, it would be having a transcendent experience, and accessing an objective level of logical thought and self-awareness that was previously unknown to it.

While this definition should be sufficient in relation to IM and EM states, ESM states raise the challenge of the 'transcendent other'. Many mystics report encounters with spiritual beings or entering spiritual landscapes, yet even if they are taken to be 'real' these clairvoyant phenomena may still only represent previously undetected natural phenomena. As the psychologist William James noted, we may be like cats in a library, seeing books and hearing conversations but unable to understand their meaning (Barnard 1997: 196). Written and spoken language are natural phenomena yet require an advanced form of cognition to perceive intelligibly, and an encounter with a powerful expression of language is capable of inducing distinct physiological changes, from rapturous moments of insight to sensual arousal. Likewise, it is conceivable that a mystic may be swept up into an ecstatic or visionary state simply through perceiving certain intelligible patterns which remain unintelligible to others, yet are no more supernatural than written language.

2. Rudolf Steiner's System of Spiritual Development

Described as 'arguably the most historically and philosophically sophisticated spokesperson of the Esoteric Tradition' (Hammer 2004: 329), and 'possibly one of the most indefatigable people who ever lived' (Watson 2010: 676), Rudolf Steiner was an intellectual and occultist who founded the Anthroposophical Society in 1912 in Cologne, Germany. Functioning inwardly as an esoteric school for the spiritual development of its members, and outwardly as a community working towards cultural reform, Anthroposophy remains 'the foremost esoteric movement in German-speaking Europe today' (Staudenmaier 2010: 107). Steiner left behind a literary legacy of over six thousand recorded lectures and more than thirty published monographs, covering topics as diverse as education, art, agriculture, medicine, philosophy, politics and religion (Ullrich 1994: 556). Trained as a scientist and philosopher, Steiner interprets his mystical experiences with a level of philosophical and theological rigour rarely equaled in the work of other esotericists.

At the core of Anthroposophy is a system of spiritual development which Steiner refers to as a 'path of initiation' (Steiner 1997: 281). While Steiner recognised the validity of various spiritual paths, he identified as a Rosicrucian and claimed that the system of spiritual development that he imparted to his students was developed by Christian Rosenkreutz to serve as the path most suitable for modern, rational humanity (Steiner 2000: 84). The Rosicrucian path is primarily a path of thinking. Steiner distinguishes between what he calls abstract thinking, the idle or arbitrary spinning of thoughts, and living thinking, (Steiner 1994: 178), which he equates with the 'praeambulum fidei' ('preamble of faith) of Thomas Aquinas (Wehr 1990: 249). Steiner argued that he arrived at his spiritual insights through an enhancement of his critical faculties, not by bypassing them. He taught that this living thinking could be cultivated to such an extent that it became spiritual seeing, spiritual hearing, and even a sense of spiritual touch,

stages of development which he termed Imaginative, Inspirational and Intuitive cognition (Hammer 2004: 423). His description of the path leading to these higher modes of cognition can be found in many of his key books, such as *How to Know Higher Worlds* (1904), *Theosophy* (1904), and *An Outline of Esoteric Science* (1910). Unlike the trance mediums common to the Spiritualist circles of his day, from which he was keen to distance himself, Steiner considered his system to be a spiritual science, a science capable of arriving at objective facts about the spiritual world solely through the powers of human cognition (Steiner 1997: 4).

In Steiner's system, development of these subtle forces begins with a preliminary stage of preparation, which involves studying works of spiritual science so as to acquire disciplined thinking as well as the concepts necessary to understand their experiences in the spiritual world (Steiner 1994: 176). This preliminary training may then be followed by advanced meditation exercises aimed at guiding the student to the stage of Imaginative cognition. These include learning to concentrate fully on a single mental image, such as a black cross wreathed with seven red roses, in order to rouse the soul to 'a kind of activity in which physical sensory impressions have no meaning' and to 'awaken dormant inner soul faculties' (Steiner 2004: 195). Steiner also offers a multitude of mantras and prayers to be recited and reflected upon during meditation (Steiner 2004: 167), as well as exercises which focus on perceiving the spiritual nature of seeds, plants, animals or humans, often in the form of auras (Steiner 91: 2004). Once these abilities are attained, the student is then able to 'enter into a conscious relationship with certain supersensible beings and forces' (Steiner 1994: 179).

Steiner taught that a sequence of spiritual trials must be overcome as each new stage of higher cognition is attained. These trials seem to represent a conscious process of learning to understand and navigate the confusion caused by having shifted one's sensory ratios through spiritual practice. In Steiner's system every enrichment of one's sensorium is assigned an elemental grade and brings with it a new set of conceptual challenges. The first trial, associated with the development of Imaginative cognition, is the fire trial, during which the imagination is gradually externalised, and 'What was customarily regarded as going forth from things “outside in space,” or “clinging to them” as properties - colours, sounds, odors, etc., - now float free in space' ('The Stages of Higher Knowledge' 1931). As Imaginative cognition matures, these free floating properties begin to organise into new forms; 'whereas it floated unattached at first, it now becomes the expression of a being' ('The Stages of Higher Knowledge' 1931). As his then student Valentin Tomberg describes in his lecture *The Occult Trials* (1992), the fire trial, 'is a matter of recognising one's own lower nature standing before oneself in undisguised form' (1992: 89) and ultimately represents a test of courage. This courage empowers the imagination and is needed in order to learn to 'paint in spiritual space' (1992: 90).

At the next stage, during the development of Inspirational cognition, 'the soul enters into a state of no longer having firm ground upon which to stand...the human soul is surrounded by endless possibilities of movement' (Tomberg 1992: 90). This trial is known elementally as the water trial, when the student must learn 'to renounce the abundance of spiritual influences' and 'a power must therefore be created that keeps the soul steadfast and gives it a sense of direction' (1992: 90). This is developed through what Steiner calls 'learning to read the occult script' (Steiner 2000: 89). This

ability is attained when the process of imagination reaches such depth that its subjective characteristics give way to the experience of seemingly objective entities appearing before the initiate (Hammer 2004: 424). Students then learn to perceive not only the expressions of spiritual beings in the form of imaginative images, but to recognise their inner qualities and the relationships that exist between them (Steiner 1997: 333). At this stage, spiritual beings are understood to be like spiritual letters, whose relationships to each other form words and sentences that reveal the spiritual structure of the cosmos (Steiner 1997: 334). Without inspirational cognition, according to Steiner, 'the imaginative world would remain like writing that we stare at without being able to read' (Steiner 1997: 335).

Finally, the student attains Intuitive cognition through undergoing the air trial. This trial differs from the preceding challenges in that, rather than facing an abundance of new spiritual impulses, the student instead 'enters into an utter loneliness and wilderness of soul life' (Tomberg 1992: 91), with no motivation to think, feel or act. Rather than surrender to passivity, however, the soul of the student 'must find the strength for an impulse-to-action within itself' (1992: 91). Steiner sometimes refers to the stage of intuitive cognition, or spiritual touch, as 'preparing the philosophers stone'. This preparation is achieved in part by 'rhythmizing the respiratory process' in order to 'evolve our own sexuality into a higher form' (Steiner 2000: 91). Steiner's explanations of these exercises are reminiscent of the internal alchemy breathing techniques found in some schools of Taoism (Eskildsen 2004: 79). At this stage the initiate is able to gain knowledge of a spiritual being not only through recognising expressions of their qualities, but through learning to unite themselves completely with the inner nature of the other being (Steiner 1997: 338). Having attained intuitive cognition, the initiate is able to remember his previous incarnations and read the Akashic record (Hammer 2004: 424) 'a record of every event and every thought that has ever occurred' (2004: 146). Steiner not only claimed to remember his own past lives, as well as the past lives of others, he also claimed to remember events occurring in the spiritual world between death and rebirth ('Life Between Death and Rebirth' 1930). Access to the afterlife realms granted him the ability to communicate with the dead (Steiner 2004: 226), as well as the nine hierarchies of angelic beings depicted by Dionysus the Areopagite (Steiner 2008: 33), and the elemental beings of the salamanders, sylphs, undines and gnomes familiar to Paracelsus (Steiner 1994: 159).

Development of these progressive stages is said to be reflected in the soul of the student, visible to clairvoyant perception, in the form of awakened chakras (wheels) or 'lotus flowers' (Steiner, 1994: 110). According to Steiner, these chakras are present in everyone, but remain in a dormant state, and appear 'of a darkish colour, quiet and unmoving' (1994: 110), until an individual undertakes dedicated spiritual practice, at which point they first begin to glow, and later rotate. While these terms are to be understood as figures of speech, Steiner refers to them as 'the sense organs of the soul' (Steiner 1994: 111). After many spiritual trials, these chakras are fully awakened, marking the conclusion of the Rosicrucian path, which Steiner describes as 'godliness, the blessed rest within all things' (2000: 58).

At each level a new experience of the world arises, a new sensory data set is revealed by having undergone the previous trial (whether experienced as an abundance or seeming lack of input), and the means to correctly perceive and function within this new world must be developed. The following section will examine cognitive models

that depict a similar process taking place at the level of unconscious processing, before discussing higher-order theories that share many similarities with Steiner's model at the level of conscious awareness.

3. Predictive Coding and the Occult Trials

In recent decades cognitive scientists have extensively analysed our cognitive feedback loops of perception and judgment through what is known as a hierarchical predictive coding (Seth, Suzuki and Critchley 2012: 1), or Bayesian (Corlett, Frith and Fletcher 2009: 515) framework. Bayesian models are now very widespread in the cognitive sciences, and are founded on the notion that incoming information is interpreted based on prior expectations (Corlett, Frith and Fletcher 2009: 516). The term 'predictive coding' refers to the way in which the brain processes bottom-up signals, or sensory data, through a series of nested cognitive levels of sensation, perception and action, by matching them with top-down predictive hypotheses. Each level functions as both a top-down predictor of the signals coming from a lower level, while providing bottom-up signals to be processed by a yet higher level (Hohwy, Roepstorff & Friston 2008, in Asprem and Taves, 2016: 5). This means that we perceive and interpret sensory data at multiple cognitive levels that have evolved over time, and if a lower perceptual level is incapable of offering an adequate explanation of certain incoming signals, these are reported to a higher perceptual level capable of more complex interpretations.

Predictive coding models are not only useful descriptions of neurological processes; it is now generally accepted that theories of predictive coding describe hierarchical models that are actively constructed by the brain itself as an explanation of its sensory inputs (Bastos et al. 2012: 695). Bastos et al. (2012) present evidence for what they term the Canonical Microcircuit, a type of cortical column replicated throughout the brain that contains the circuitry required to implement a form of Bayesian inference computation. The model is based on extensive evidence from neuroimaging studies, supported by case studies in neuropsychology which demonstrate, for example, the existence of excitatory cells that communicate to higher areas in the brain hierarchy, and inhibitory cells that send signals to lower areas of the brain (Bastos et al. 2012: 699), correlating with the Bayesian model of bottom-up error signaling and top-down predictions (Hashkes-Pink, et al. 2017: 5). Related studies have also indicated that top-down predictions are transmitted by lower alpha or beta frequencies while error signaling is communicated through faster gamma frequencies (Hashkes-Pink, et al. 2017: 5).

In the Bayesian model of perception, higher levels of cognition offer explanatory hypotheses for experiences that cannot be accounted for at a lower cognitive level. These hypotheses are based on concepts drawn from the individual's own experience, but if found to be appropriate, will enable them to navigate the new experience effectively. The level of cognition is in some sense objective, since there is a level of processing complexity and neural signal diversity that could potentially be measured by brain activity, and yet is interpreted subjectively, based on an individual's particular set of concepts. This body of research therefore indicates a potential bridge between constructivist and perennialist explanations of mystical experiences, and demonstrates that Steiner's notion of a hierarchy of distinct modes of cognition is an

appropriate representation of both the brain's perceptual processes and physical structure. In my opinion, the occult trials described by Steiner and Tomberg closely resemble a process of generating new top-down hypotheses to account for new bottom-up sensory signals. Yet while perception theorists insist that the processes described by predictive coding models are unconscious and do not refer to conscious acts of hypothesis testing (Asprem and Taves 2016: 6), current theories of consciousness indicate that a similar appraisal process may occur at the level of conscious introspection.

4. Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness

In his article *A higher order Bayesian decision theory of consciousness* (2008), Hakwan C. Lau argues that Bayesian models of perception are a crucial feature of theories of consciousness known as higher-order representational (HOR) theories of consciousness (Lau 2008: 35). Whereas predictive coding theories refer to an unconscious perceptual process, higher-order theories postulate that individuals are able to purposefully shift to higher levels of cognition, just as Steiner states that 'we can transpose ourselves into the state for higher perception whenever it is appropriate' (1994: 164). There are several major varieties of HOR theories. Rocco J. Gennaro's *The Consciousness Paradox: Consciousness, Concepts and Higher-Order Thoughts* (2012) provides an excellent overview of the various types[1]. Higher-order perception theory (HOP) in particular closely resembles Steiner's own model of consciousness.

Higher-order theories are significant to this discussion for two main reasons. Firstly, they present an explanation of how unconscious sensory data can become conscious due to an individual acquiring new concepts. This ability is not explained by many competing theories of consciousness, and yet is essential for understanding not only Steiner's developmental model, clairvoyance, and the occult trials, but the effect of learning in general. I may acquire subtle concepts on a wine tasting course, for example, which then cause me to notice the dryness or heaviness of a wine, and consequently alter and complexify my conscious experiences of tasting wine (Gennaro 2012: 29). Secondly, HOR models of consciousness not only posit the existence of multiple levels of cognition that we are able to consciously shift between at will, but allow for our potential to develop yet higher levels of cognition, as Steiner asserts is possible.

The major claim made by HOR theorists is that that we become conscious of the world through the act of forming a higher-order representation of the world for ourselves (Gennaro 2012: 13). This means that we are only ever consciously aware of those aspects of the world that we 'describe' or represent to ourselves. This would explain why we are inevitably conscious of some aspects of our field of experience and unconscious of others. A commonly cited example is of someone driving 'on autopilot' while consciously thinking of something else, who then cannot remember getting home. Their ability to navigate proves that they were able to perceive the road, but with little conscious experience of doing so. A related phenomenon has been well

1 Current theories of consciousness can largely be divided into first-order representational (FOR) theories and higher-order representational (HOR) theories, though there are numerous variations of both models, as well as competing non-representational theories.

documented in studies of blindsight patients, individuals with lesions in the primary visual area of the brain who report a lack of visual consciousness in particular regions of their visual field, yet can successfully guess the characteristics of a stimulus they cannot consciously see up to 80-90% of the time (Lau 2008: 36). These studies indicate that conscious experience and perception are two different things, highlighting the need for a theory of why we are conscious of some experiences and not others if consciousness is not necessarily required for perception or navigation.

Theorists opposed to higher-order theories, such as Ned Block (2011) have failed to offer an adequate alternative explanation of this issue, and instead claim that it is connected to the hard problem of consciousness and is therefore beyond the ability of theorists to explain for the foreseeable future (2011: 423). Conversely, Lau (2008) proposes that individuals establish criterions of whether a stimulus is present or absent based on a Bayesian appraisal process, and that as a result of their brain defects blindsight patients establish abnormally high criterions for signal detection in certain areas, causing them to fail to represent, and thereby become consciously aware of, stimuli present in their visual field (2008: 38). This explanation of blindsight may also explain the role concepts play in our perceptual processes. Each new concept may shift our criterions for signal detection, and so acquiring the concept of dryness from a connoisseur can cause us to represent flavours of wine to ourselves that previously went undetected.

4.1 Higher Order Introspection

According to HOR theory, introspection occurs when a higher-order representation of a mental state, such as the state of tasting an apple, is itself represented by a still higher HOR. While I am aware of the flavour of the apple due to the second-order representation, I am able to reflect on my memories and associations of eating apples due to the third-order representation. This means that until the second-order representation has itself been represented by a third-order representation, I am fully 'in the moment', enjoying the apple; it is the third order of representations that enables me to reflect on my experience. Introspection therefore requires at least three levels – the unconscious mental state, the higher-order representation of that state, and then the HOR of that representation, forming a three-tier cognitive feedback loop (Gennaro 2012: 30).

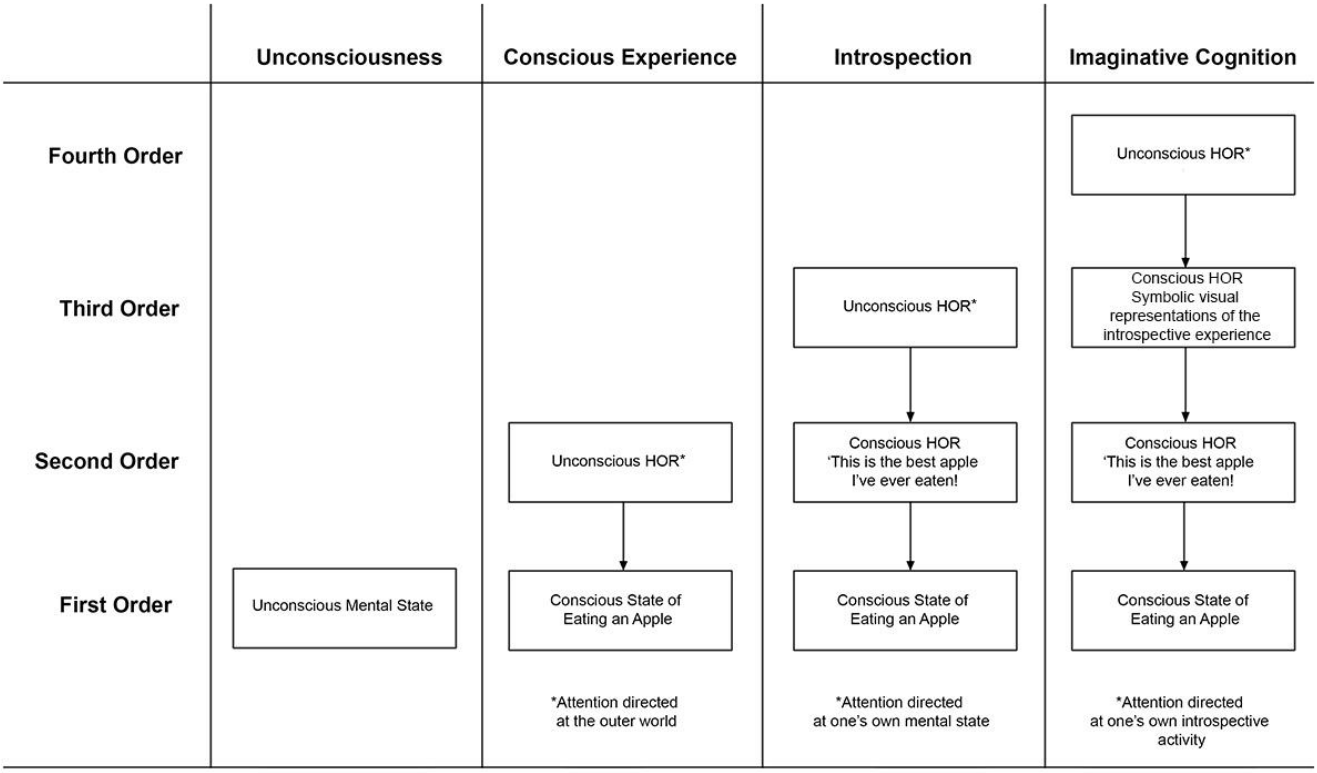

Figure 1: Based on Robert Gennaro's diagram of introspective activity according to HOT theory (Gennaro 2012: 30).

While discussion of HOR theories typically stop at the three-tiered model necessary to explain introspection, HOR theories leave open the possibility of a person learning to attain a perspective beyond their own typical introspective activity, and to thereby develop four or five-tier representations of their own mental states. In his philosophical study, *The Philosophy of Freedom* (2008), Steiner describes his 'pure thinking' as a kind of thinking that 'arises when we contemplate thinking itself (2008: 122). Taken in context, Steiner is referring to his becoming aware of the kind of introspection illustrated by the three-tiered HOR model, meaning that Steiner is discussing at minimum a four-tiered HOR model of introspection. This raises the possibility that each shift, from imaginative to inspirational and intuitive cognition, may be achieved through learning to represent our highest-order representations to ourselves at a still higher level.

In HOR theory, the highest HOR of our experience, which we could crudely call 'the observer', is always unconscious. This means that if we are only aware of one representative level, such as our representations of eating the apple, the part of ourselves observing that higher-order representational level is an unconscious, higher HOR. This means that there is always a level of higher-order representational activity occurring of which we are unaware, and so accessing a higher level of representations can be seen as a process of becoming conscious of our current highest level of cognition. This is another way in which HOR theories resemble Steiner's model. Steiner distinguishes between what he calls the 'real I or ego', and 'ego-consciousness' (2008: 124). For him the real ego is to be found in the faculty of pure thinking, of which we remain unconscious, but ego-consciousness 'arises through the traces which the activity of thinking engraves upon our general consciousness' (2008: 124). This distinction between an unconscious higher faculty, the I, which is

consciously expressed at a lower cognitive level as the ego, strongly resembles the distinction between unconscious upper HORs, and conscious lower HORs.

4.2 Higher-Order Perception Theory

Arguably the model of HOR theory that most closely resembles Steiner's own view is commonly known as higher-order perception (HOP) theory. Some trace the idea of HOP back to the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), who said that 'consciousness is the perception of what passes in a man's own mind' (Gennaro 2012: 13). HOP theory is sometimes called inner-sense theory, because it postulates that it is inner-senses, or 'internal attentional mechanisms' (Lycan 2004: 99) that perceive lower order mental states.

One of the benefits of inner-sense theory is that it is able to account for the fact that someone might experience a sensation of pain, or the impression of a certain colour, in the absence of any external stimuli causing the experience. Unlike other HOR theories, HOP theory allows for the possibility of experiencing our second or third-order representations in the absence of first-order experiences. This model aligns with Steiner's previously mentioned descriptions of the development of clairvoyant perception, when phenomenal properties such as colours, sounds and odors usually experienced in association with objects begin to 'float free in space' ('The Stages of Higher Knowledge' 1931), before gradually organising into expressions of spiritual beings. Yet Steiner is keen to point out that he is not discussing hallucinations. In his description of sensing auras, Steiner emphasises that the colours seen with the organs of the soul are not like colours seen with our physical eyes, rather 'through spiritual perception we experience something similar to the impression made by physical colors' (1994: 59), and warns that we will become confused 'in the worst way' if we expect 'the spiritual world to be a replica of the physical world' (1994: 60). Just as in the occult trials, Steiner seems to be describing a process of projecting new top-down interpretations onto the experience of a higher-order level of representations of which he was previously unaware.

One major objection to HOP theory is that inner-senses which perceive thinking should give rise to a phenomenology distinctive of inner sense. Critics claim that no matter how hard you concentrate on your outer (first-order) experiences, 'you won't find any further phenomenological properties arising out of the attention you pay to them, beyond those already belonging to the experiences themselves' (Carruthers 2016: 15). This may be a key area in which, as Sebastian Voros (2013) suggested, cognitive science may benefit from incorporating the claims of mystics and esotericists into its models. The objection is based on the assumption that thoughts do not exhibit phenomenal properties, which is a hotly debated topic in philosophy of mind (Jorba 2016: 45). If one sides with the defenders of cognitive phenomenology, then the experience of thought, expressed as inner speech, intentionality, categorical perception and other qualities, can be interpreted as the perception of the first level (2nd tier) of higher-order representations. We could therefore say that our experience of having 'a voice in our head' is one aspect of the phenomenology distinctive of inner sense. Steiner claims that his clairvoyant experiences arise from learning to contemplate thinking itself, which in this model would mean becoming aware of his second level (3rd tier) higher-order representations, and just as HOP theory predicts, this new perspective gives rise to a new phenomenology distinctive of inner-sense,

this time in the form of an externalised and seemingly objectified visual imagination. As Steiner states, 'in the spiritual world, colours are higher than sounds and words' (1994: 165).

An additional criticism of inner-sense theory is based on the fact that the postulated internal monitors, reminiscent of Steiner's 'sense organs of the soul' (Steiner 2004: 97), would need to be immensely powerful physical devices in order to generate higher-order experiences that represent first-order experiences in all their detail and complexity. Philosopher Peter Carruthers argues that these internal scanners would need to be almost as complex as the visual system itself, and that there is no 'plausible story to tell about the evolutionary pressures that led to their construction' (2016: 17). Again the Bayesian framework is useful here, since it presents evidence that the brain processes sensory data through a multitude of cognitive levels before that data is translated into conscious impressions, at which point, according to HOR theory, it can then be processed consciously at further levels. To the extent that each level gives an appraisal of signals transmitted by a lower cognitive level, it can be said to be acting as an internal monitor.

Some insight into this issue may also be gained from the field of psychedelic research. Reports of psychedelic experiences could be interpreted as extreme examples of experiencing higher-order representations in the absence of related sensory input (Strassman 2001, Hill 2013, Cole-Turner 2014). While Steiner never discussed psychedelics, he does claim that techniques exist through which temporary experiences of higher worlds can be forced without spiritual practice, and the phenomenology of psychedelic journeys certainly aligns with Steiner's own claims (Grof 2008: 17). In his mescaline-inspired texts *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell* (1994), Aldous Huxley speculated that psychedelics lowered 'the biological efficiency of the brain' which seemed 'to permit entry into consciousness of certain classes of mental events, which are normally excluded' (1994: 63). Huxley compared his model of the brain to a 'reducing valve' (1994: 104), a comparison that has since been found to be appropriate by researchers examining the neural correlates of the psychedelic state induced by psilocybin (Carhart-Harris et al. 2012: 2142). According to the researchers, 'the results strongly imply that the subjective effects of psychedelic drugs are caused by decreased activity and connectivity in the brain's key connector hubs, enabling a state of unconstrained cognition' (2012: 2138). A more recent study correlated the psychedelic phenomenology of ketamine, LSD and psylocibin experiences with an increase in neural signal diversity, which represents 'an elevated level of consciousness' (Schartner et al. 2017: 1). These findings strongly imply that rather than requiring a distinct, specialised, internal monitoring 'device' in the brain, visionary states are produced through what neuroscientist Thomas Metzinger would call a 'spatially distributed, but functionally distinct neural correlate' (Metzinger 2009: 257) of the subjective state. Therefore, this latter objection cited by Carruthers appears to be based on a false conception of the biological requirements of the theory.

Higher-order theories of consciousness not only parallel Steiner's hierarchical model of spiritual development, they also share the notion that concepts play a central role in our ability to access these higher levels of consciousness. The following sections will explore the roles played by concepts and language in the induction and interpretation of mystical experience.

5. Conceptualism and the Void

According to Steiner, our inner senses, or spiritual organs of perception, are developed through the acquisition and synthesis of concepts ('The Science of Knowing' 1924). These concepts are acquired through the exercise of sense-free thinking, which Steiner compares to mathematical reasoning. Steiner's insistence that an individual's spiritual experiences are entirely dependent upon the concepts they possess can be understood as a kind of spiritual conceptualism. Conceptualists maintain that the perceptual content of an experience is fully determined by the concepts possessed by the subject of that experience (Gennaro 2012: 135). This view is supported by the fact that the acquisition of new concepts clearly changes our perceptual experience, as in the obvious case of learning a new language, in which arbitrary marks become symbols imbued with meaning, as well as in the previously mentioned example of wine-tasting.

However, scholars of mysticism such as Robert Forman (1990) have argued that it is possible to have experiences that are entirely devoid of conceptual content. In his previously mentioned work *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (1990), Forman explores the implications of a form of IM experience that he calls the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE), defined as 'a wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness (1990: 8). The PCE is an introvertive mystical experience, which Forman considers to be synonymous with the Hindu guru Ramana Maharshi's description of the experience of samadhi (1990: 8). Forman agrees with Stephen Bernhardt (1990), who argues that 'it just does not seem that there is sufficient complexity during the pure consciousness event to say that any such conceptually constructive elements are involved' and that such mystics do not seem to be 'employing concepts...drawing upon memory...language or accumulation of prior experience, or discriminating and integrating' (1990: 232). Since it seems that a truly contentless experience must by definition be the same for all mystics who experience a PCE, Forman concludes that his model 'swings the pendulum back toward the perennial philosophy camp' (1990: 39).

In his masterpiece *The Book of Five Rings* (1645), the mystic Japanese sword saint Miyamoto Musashi writes 'The void is nothingness...People in this world look at things mistakenly, and think that what they do not understand must be the void. This is not the true void. It is bewilderment' (Musashi 1974: 95). Both Rudolf Steiner and conceptualist Robert Gennaro (2005) would seem to agree. Gennaro argues that PCEs, contrary to Forman's claims, contain the minimum conceptual content of 'I am in mental state M now' required for a state to be conscious according to HOR theory (2005: 9), which contains the three concepts 'I', 'mental state M', and 'now'. For Gennaro, the assertion that PCEs feature no mental concepts at all is exaggerated, and PCEs are not strictly devoid of content, but are simply devoid of the 'typical content' (2005: 12). He points out that terms like 'emptiness' or 'absence' are comparative concepts employed in contrast to 'something' or some content (2005: 12). Also, there seems to be a contradiction between Forman's claim that during his own PCE experiences 'there is no particular or identifiable object of which I am aware', and his conviction that 'I just know that I was awake without a break, that there was a continuity of myself (however we define that) throughout' (Forman 1999: 20). Gennaro contends that references to 'an awareness of self' imply the conscious employment of the concept 'I', and that 'it is difficult to understand how practitioners can later

remember and describe these events without having employed conscious I-thoughts during the alleged PCE' (2005: 11). PCE reports also seem to involve a temporal component, since if the concept 'now' were not applied during a PCE, then it would not be possible to distinguish the PCE from a memory of the past or a vision of the future (2005: 14). Finally he asks, 'If there were nothing it is like to have a PCE, why would so many people wish to be in that state and be able afterwards to describe the experience?' (2005: 23).

Forman's claim that the PCE is a non-conceptual experience seems to be based on an overly narrow definition of the term 'concept'. It has been proven that infants acquire spatial concepts such as depth and an accompanying fear of falling, before they acquire language (McShane 1991: 63-64), and experimental work in the cognitive neuroscience of attention demonstrates that 'conceptual knowledge shapes perception as early as the lateral geniculate nucleus' (Gennaro 2012: 137), a relay centre in the thalamus that is present in rodents and other lower mammals. While the study of concepts in cognitive science remains largely anthropocentric, there is extensive evidence suggesting that non-human animals, from pigeons to monkeys and apes, display 'convincing evidence of their conceptual abilities' (Zentall et al. 2008: 38). Research therefore strongly suggests that our higher concepts are built upon more fundamental concepts that have evolved over millions of years, and it has been established that just as our concepts and language are hierarchically structured, so they are hierarchically processed by the brain (Mehler et al. 1998: 368, Ding et al. 2016: 158). For example, the concept 'efficiency' will mean different things to different people, but anyone who possesses the concept must already possess some concept of 'effort', and also of 'reward'. These basic concepts are built upon still more fundamental concepts that appear to have been carried over from our early mammalian ancestors, such as pleasure and pain. While it is not overly challenging to suppose that the recitation of a mantra or other spiritual techniques which deflect attention from habitual thought patterns may induce the experience of transcending linguistic conceptual structures related to one's ordinary identity and circumstance, it is far more difficult to imagine such a practice transcending the experience of fundamental conceptual content that has been part of our perceptual apparatus since the days of our lower mammalian ancestors. Even Musashi, having declared the void to be nothingness, states that 'there is also timing in the void' (Musashi 1974: 48).

5.1 Transforming the Astral Body

From a conceptualist perspective, the ability to access these mystical states can only be brought about through the acquisition of new concepts. The preceding discussion implies that IM experiences result from interpreting our sensory experience from a lower, pre-verbal conceptual level while maintaining awareness of our higher 'I' concept. Steiner referred to these pre-verbal conceptual structures underlying our linguistic, ego-consciousness as the 'astral body', which represents our animal nature (Steiner 1994: 159). In Steiner's system the spiritual concepts that give rise to imaginative cognition are not simply built upon concepts relating to our everyday ego-consciousness, but are transformations of the pre-verbal concepts acquired from our evolutionary heritage. The 'higher organs of perception', sculpted through conceptual development, 'are created out of the substance of the astral body' (Steiner 1997: 325). This newly transformed astral body is then considered to represent an additional fifth subtle body, which serves as the basis for imaginative cognition. This can be seen as

a new conceptual level linking one's linguistic, ego-consciousness to their pre-verbal, 'animal' consciousness.

Yet one might object that even if Forman's PCE includes conceptual content, it does not follow that it only arises as a result of conceptual development. However, IM and EM experiences cannot merely be the result of sinking below the level of linguistic concepts into a state of pre-verbal conceptual awareness; to the extent that one becomes able to repeat the process of attaining IM and EM experiences a concept of how to enter such states must have been developed based on a familiarity with a sequence of mental states. These concepts may be explicitly understood within a technical meditation tradition, or they may be non-linguistic, comparable to the pre-verbal development of the concept of depth in infants, but representing a kind of inner depth of concentration or insight. Just as an infant can be said to possess the concept of depth before they are able to explain it, a mystic may possess the concept of inner depth required to access IM and EM states without explicit understanding of their own abilities. Also, these concepts would not correspond to the content of either conceptual level, but would stand in a category of their own, referring only to the relationship between these conceptual levels.

One might further object, however, that surely these mystics could not fully possess the concepts necessary to have IM, EM or ESM experiences before having these experiences for the first time. This objection is related to what is called the 'fineness of grain' argument against conceptualism, which is based on the assertion that one can experience many properties or objects without possessing the corresponding concepts relating to those specific properties or objects (Gennaro 2012: 173). However, conceptualists argue that we are capable of having these experiences due to our ability to form demonstrative concepts, such as 'that shade of red' (2012: 173), or comparative concepts, such as 'that shade is darker than this one' (2012: 176) in order to identify new experiences with some level of accuracy. As already noted, we have many levels of concepts, just as we have many levels of perception. An alien object can therefore be demonstratively identified by its parts, as in 'these look like wings', before an overall concept of the object and its function is acquired. Similarly, demonstrative concepts such as 'more relaxed', or 'less distracted' can be employed in the appraisal of new mental states during spiritual practices. With repeated successes, familiarity with these states may then lead to the development of higher concepts that enable mystics to re-enter the mystical state more efficiently by employing multiple strategies simultaneously during meditation, such as deep breathing, strong posture and deep concentration on an object, for example. In this way, demonstrative and comparative concepts are combined to form specific higher concepts.

This model would help account for Forman's observation that 'it is not unusual to hear of an untrained and uninitiated neophyte who has a mystical experience without any deep preconditioning' (Forman 1990: 20). Conceptualism suggests they may develop this ability unconsciously or by accident, perhaps while attempting to develop some other skill that requires great concentration. The fact that these concepts can be acquired unconsciously also implies that it is possible for animals and infants alike to have mystical experiences of their own. These concepts would then represent a new conceptual category or cognitive mode, one relating our higher, linguistic concepts to our lower, pre-verbal concepts. Therefore, in the case of IM, EM, and ESM states alike,

each can be said to result from accessing or developing a higher-order conceptual level beyond that of the ordinary level of introspection that we associate with self-awareness. Transpersonal developmental stages would then arise as a consequence of gradually coming to identify with this higher-order cognitive level.

5.2 The Imagination as a Conceptual Language System

Steiner's spiritual system can be seen as being driven by a 'talismatic' development of concepts (Idel 1992: 44). He taught that, as the student acquires ever more subtle concepts, 'the concepts join themselves into a united system of concepts within which every one has its particular place' ('The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity' 1894). At the stage of inspirational cognition, 'All that previously appeared only in isolated figures, sounds and colours now appears as one great interrelated whole' (1994: 73), enabling the student to then 'read in the higher world' (1994: 73). He likens the stage of imaginative cognition that preceded it to 'learning the letters of the alphabet in order to spell' (1994: 73). Like the kabbalist, who builds an inner house, 'which is the combination of letters, filled by illumination and perfection [and] to prepare a Tabernacle for God' (Rabbi Moses Eliaqim Beriah 1875, fol. 8a, in Idel 1992: 42), Steiner instructs his students to work to understand their concepts as a unified system in preparation for a higher synthesis.

An example of one of Steiner's talismatic conceptual systems can be found in a short cycle of four lectures given in 1914, collectively published under the title *Human and Cosmic Thought* (1991), in which Steiner argues that there are essentially twelve key philosophical standpoints, one for each sign of the zodiac. The constellation Cancer, for example, represents the philosophical perspective of Materialism. On the opposite side of the zodiacal wheel, Capricorn represents the Spiritist perspective, which maintains that the material world is only a revelation or manifestation of the spiritual world (1991: 30). These two perspectives represent the extreme polarities between which the ten other standpoints are arranged, such as Mathematism or Monadism, according to what degree they are spiritually or materialistically based. In Steiner's view, 'all twelve standpoints are fully justifiable' (1991: 40) and all 'parties are correct in their respective spheres' (1991: 31). However, all perspectives are not equally valuable in the analysis of different phenomena. A Materialist worldview is exceptionally useful in an examination of the physical world for example, 'but in speaking of the Spirit they may utter nothing but foolishness' (1991: 31). The same could, of course, be said of Spiritists speaking of matter. Steiner asserted, therefore, that 'the world cannot be rightly considered from the one-sided standpoint of one single conception, one single mode of thought; the world discloses itself only to someone who knows that one must look at it from all sides' (1991: 39). For Steiner, this perspective-from-all-perspectives represented the natural position of the Anthroposophist.

In spite of Steiner's dualistic language, his metaphysical model actually represents a form of dual-aspect monism. Dual-aspect theory can be traced back to Spinoza's Ethics and is the idea that physical and mental properties are two aspects of the same one thing, in an equal and non-reductive way (Benovsky 2016: 341). This idea is closely related to panpsychism, the view that all things have mind or a mind-like quality (Skrbina 2005: 2). While there are possible emergentist conceptions of dual-aspect monism in which only entities of sufficient complexity are said to possess mental

aspects, Steiner was a clear panpsychist who rejected the emergentist view and held that consciousness is fundamental and is present in the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms ('The Elementary Kingdoms' 1907). Steiner's spiritual beings have material aspects (Steiner 2008: 84), meaning that, according to Steiner, they consequently must also have mathematical aspects, sensational aspects, psychic aspects, and so on, according to each of his twelve philosophical perspectives. Their material aspects are simply less significant than their spiritual aspects, just as the mathematical aspects of a love affair are far less significant than its emotional aspects. Therefore, it is important to note that when Steiner spoke of spiritual beings, he was referring to patterns in nature, in thought, in culture, which, if interpreted imaginatively, took on certain reliable representations.

Steiner's transpersonal concepts can therefore be understood as a kind of specialised language developed for specific purposes, just like mathematics or systems of formal logic. It is a system of symbolic correspondences that can be applied to the world to reveal new information about ourselves and our environment. The key abilities the clairvoyant claims to possess, those of seeing auras, sensing and conversing with spiritual beings, and even seeing into the past or future, can each be understood as experiences of knowledge that would previously have remained unconscious. Consequently, a claim to be able to read someone's aura can be seen as a phenomenological claim, rather than as a physical claim regarding undetected energy clouds emanating from our bodies. By tapping into the sensory experience of the body, which has evolved keen senses for reading energetic and emotional states of attraction and aggression over millions of years, and learning to represent this bodily wisdom imaginatively, it may be possible for the clairvoyant to gain greater insight into the realities of their interpersonal relationships, as Steiner claims (1994: 179). This ability may extend to accurately perceiving the state of other living organisms such as plants and eco-systems, or the moods of crowds, which may be imaginatively represented not only as auras but as active spiritual beings.

However, Steiner is typical of many esotericists in claiming that his particular system of correspondences is universally true, while also employing the strategies of pattern recognition and eclecticism identified by Olav Hammer to support his 'perennialist belief in an underlying spiritual unity behind religious diversity' (Hammer 2004: 161). Yet, throughout history many similar claims have been made regarding spoken language itself. For Origen, St. Augustine, and Guillaume Postel, the universal, original language was undoubtedly Hebrew (Eco 1997: 74-75), yet for the Irish grammarians it was Gaelic (p.16), whereas the baron de Ryckholt claimed that 'Flemish is the only language spoken in the cradle of humanity' and 'it alone is a language, while all the rest, dead or living are but mere dialects or debased forms more or less disguised' (Droixhe 1990, in Eco 1995: 97). If we can expect the cultural understanding of symbol systems relating to higher modes of cognition to follow a similar trajectory to cultural conceptions of spoken language, then Steiner's claims to complete objectivity are unsurprising given how relatively uncommon his mode of thinking remains. Just as multiculturalism gradually eroded beliefs in the one true language, so we might expect an eruption of vocal esotericists, each grounded in their own personally objective imaginative systems, to erode the strong perennialism so common in the early days of a new language.

Conclusion

By comparing Steiner's descriptions of his own mystical experiences with current findings in the cognitive sciences, Steiner's higher modes of cognition have been modeled as forms of higher-order conceptual development. Evidence has been presented which strongly suggests that basic human faculties of perception, introspection, language use and psychedelic visionary experience are all founded on hierarchical structures both generated by the brain, and reflected in the structure of the brain itself. I have argued that these findings support Steiner's claims that these faculties can be further developed to enable mystics to perceive new patterns of information, to introspect at a higher level by learning to observe introspection itself, and to 'discover' new forms of language pertaining to these new perceptual abilities. Based on higher-order perception theory, Steiner's clairvoyant abilities may be seen as the distinctive phenomenology that arises as a result of accessing higher-order perceptions, just as our inner monologue can be seen as the distinctive phenomenology associated with our current capacity for introspection.

From a conceptualist perspective, IM, EM and ESM experiences must each be dependent upon a process of conceptual development. I have supported Robert Gennaro's (2005) argument that IM and EM states cannot be non-conceptual states, but are more likely to be experiences of states of awareness founded on more fundamental, pre-verbal concepts. This ability to access pre-verbal conceptual structures and thereby experience a state of awareness outside of one's customary conceptual identity may stimulate the development of a higher conceptual identity beyond that of the ordinary ego, leading to the permanent stage shifts or 'awakenings' reported by transpersonal psychologists. This would align with Steiner's model of higher modes of cognition being developed through the top-down transformation of our own animal nature in the form of the 'astral body'. I have therefore argued that Steiner's clairvoyant experiences may be the result of him having learned to consciously conceptualise the unconscious knowledge of the body within a religious framework.

While constructivists such as Olav Hammer have dismissed the validity of esoteric conceptual structures by exposing the differences between these supposedly universal spiritual truths, in my opinion the importance of this esoteric material is found not in its form but in its function. No one knows how language developed among our early ancestors, but many suspect that we learned to sing before we spoke (Brandt et al. 2012), that our developing linguistic capacities first served as entertainment. It was only through learning to associate spoken sounds with objects in the external world, and by extension, memory, that the power of language was unleashed. For a time it must have served the simple purposes of early hunter gatherers, the naming of plants and animals, of people and tools, before we mastered the art of storytelling. Later, with the development of abstract reasoning came a reflexive awareness of the underlying structures of language itself, through the classical study of logic, grammar, music and mathematics. If we consider much of esotericism to represent the development of the imagination as a conceptual language, it seems to follow a similar trajectory. During a time when the imagination primarily serves as a source of fantasy entertainment, comparable to humanity's first songs, a few individuals begin to locate their own imaginative imagery within the external world through a more or less conscious process of association. The association of colours to objects is referred to as 'seeing

auras', and spiritual beings, once merely 'imagined', become elementals associated with rocks, rivers, wind, fire, and so on. As one becomes increasingly familiar with these associations, an underlying grammar or logic begins to emerge. Associations evolve into astrological mandalas and tables of correspondences; as Steiner writes, 'All that previously appeared only in isolated figures, sounds and colours now appears as one great interrelated whole' (1994: 73). Understanding these associations leads to the development of new occult languages and the discovery of relationships underlying various phenomena through what Steiner refers to as learning to read 'the occult script' (1994: 72). And just as classical cultures often claimed to possess the one true language, so clairvoyants such as Steiner claim to perceive one objective, spiritual world.

While for some the reading of auras or the act of conversing with spirits might seem like inconsequential cognitive achievements, to our early hominid ancestors the association of sounds with objects may have seemed similarly inconsequential. Likewise, just as it is hard for most of us to imagine living in a state where our own imaginations are manifested externally in our surroundings at will, as Steiner claims is possible, early humans could never have suspected that they would one day have an inner monologue running almost constantly as a result of their embrace of language. And just as our linguistic abilities eventually enabled us to make profound discoveries regarding the age and evolution of the planet, the cosmos, and of biology, so too our imaginative abilities may enable esotericists to make related discoveries, to read the akashic record (with questionable levels of accuracy) by observing processes and testing theories related to their particular modes of perception. When we consider how many millenia it took for our species to develop mythology, medicine, architecture, mathematics, and modern science after the dawn of our introspective capacities, it is no surprise if Steiner's claims are not proven to be correct, any more than we might expect the early mythologies of hunter gatherers to be accurate depictions of reality. This does not disprove the claim that they are able to access a higher level of cognition, however, nor does it mean that their teachings do not contain wisdom. Perhaps Steiner's 'spiritual science' can be thought of as the mythology of a new cognitive level.

Whether or not these imaginative associations have an objective basis or are subjectively applied to the external world is largely irrelevant to an evaluation of esoteric practice. As Einstein famously asked, 'How is it possible that mathematics, a product of human thought that is independent of experience, fits so excellently the objects of physical realty? Can human reason without experience discover by pure thinking properties of real things? (1921, in Kline, 1982: 340). Steiner would answer with a resounding 'yes'. Put another way, was mathematics invented or discovered? There is no easy answer, yet while philosophers debate the issue, mathematicians continue to make breakthroughs in mathematics. This pragmatic approach to truth seems equally applicable in the domain of esotericism. Are these spiritual beings and visionary landscapes invented or discovered? We only know that they continue to be experienced and studied by those who apply the methods of mysticism.

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