CHAPTER 11

The Problems of a Gnostic Science:
The Case of Theosophy’s Occult Chemistry

The Relativist draws down the Veil of Isis, and says: this knowledge is forever hidden from us. The Teachers in the Eastern Schools reverently lift the veil, and say: the solution of even these most inner mysteries, by searching, thou shalt find.

G. E. Sutcliffe, Studies in Occult Chemistry and Physics (1923), xv

Introduction: The Problems of a “Gnostic” Science¹

Founded in 1875, in the middle of the so-called Victorian conflict between science and religion,² the Theosophical Society has always exhibited an ambivalent attitude towards science and academic research. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and the early Theosophists claimed to seek a critical reconciliation between religion and science, guided by a quest for esoteric “higher truth”.³ The Theosophists’ goal was, in a sense, a “gnostic” one: the aim was to transcend the limits of reason and faith, and gaze through the veil of Isis to recover hidden, higher truths.⁴ As we shall see in the present chapter, this

¹ Parts of the present chapter are based on an article published as Asprem, ‘Theosophical Attitudes toward Science’, while other parts are based on a paper given at the 3rd international conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism in Szeged, Hungary, in July 2011.
³ Note, however, that the original occasion for the Society’s founding appears to have been of more practical and explicitly magical nature, and especially focused on the practice of “astral travel”. See John Patrick Deveney, Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society; idem, Paschal Beverly Randolph, 284–298.
⁴ I am, of course, referring here to the notion of “gnosis” as discussed at length in the previous chapter, and intend no connection whatsoever to the many sects of late antiquity which have commonly—and problematically—been referred to by the term “gnostic”. For the problematics of the “Gnosticism” category in this latter historical sense, see especially Michael Allen Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”.
quest made contemporary natural sciences into ambiguous “Others” for Theosophy. The “ascended master” Koot Hoomi succinctly stated the problem in one of the “Mahatma Letters” received by the Theosophist Allan Octavian Hume in 1882: ‘Modern science is our best ally. Yet it is generally that same science which is made the enemy to break our heads with’. Since Theosophy claimed to possess eternal truths, shadows of its doctrine ought to be reflected somewhere in the rapidly growing knowledge base of the sciences. Its principles should be strengthened by scientific inquiry. Why, then, the hostility of some contemporary scientists? How to account for the lack of agreement with “materialist science”? The answer was clear enough: natural science is a cumulative and fallible enterprise, and contemporary science remained incomplete. It could be used to “break the heads” of Theosophists only because it still suffered from inaccuracies and false assumptions. Any apparent disagreements between perennial “higher truth” and scientific knowledge could be dismissed as gaps and imperfections in science’s present worldview. As science progressed further, however, it was destined to corroborate the deeper truths already revealed by Theosophy.

The Theosophical attitude to science rested on a view that did not allow for a clear separation between the natural world and higher realms. Possessing higher knowledge was thought to give the necessary authority to pass verdict on the correctness of scientific claims about nature. Scientific knowledge about the world could, vice versa, be used to corroborate higher truths—not as mere analogy or Swedenborgian correspondence, but as providing pieces of fact and evidence that were important elements in the greater structure of esoteric knowledge. In short, higher knowledge has empirical consequences, and the expectation was that empirical data will support exalted cosmological visions. This aspect is impossible to miss if one reads Blavatsky’s major works, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). In *The Secret Doctrine*, for example, much time is spent on the notion of spiritual evolution—not, it has to be noted, as analogical to biological evolution, but as a fully integrated and essential part of the material development of organisms. With a basis in esoteric knowledge claims Blavatsky not only felt that she was in a position to dismiss Haeckel’s version of Darwinism, but also to make a number of claims about such things as the geological development of planet earth, the origin

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6 The incompleteness of science is a common theme in Theosophical discourse, and it is made explicit in the same letter quoted from above. E.g., ibid., 60–63.