

## The Problem of Universalism vs Particularism

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The idea that there is but one universal religion or perennial philosophy inevitably present in *all* the religions and/or philosophies of the world or some single ancient Indo-Aryan religion from which *all* later religions can be traced and into which *all* present religions can be reduced are beliefs frequently encountered these days both in popular culture, such as the so-called History Channel and late-night radio, and in Freemasonry; but it is no longer all that popular among scholars. In the contemporary university, universalism is considered an antiquated idea—an approach which was crude, at best, even in the heyday of its popularity.

The Age of Enlightenment's particular version of religious universalism has been widely influential within Freemasonry. It was based upon a methodology of reductionism—that something is “nothing but” something else. By a quirk of fate (and logic) the victory of Enlightenment universalism led to its own undoing. If everything is the same as everything else, nothing seems to make a difference. *All* is relative. Today, religious, cultural, moral, and even cognitive “relativism” reign supreme. Even truth is relative. We hear people say: “It may be true for you but that doesn't mean that it's true for me.” Or: “You may have *your* truth, but I have *my* truth.” We forget that the whole point of the idea of truth, was, of course, to locate something that was “true for everybody!”

Are there no universals? In my opinion, there are a few, but they difficult to prove. For example, I am convinced the concept of “justice as fairness”—or, more accurately, “injustice as unfairness”—can be observed in the actions and language of all toddlers (18-36 months)--at least to the extent that *they* want to be treated fairly by others, although they may not want to treat *others* fairly in return. It only takes one clearly established counter-example, an *experimentum crucis*, to refute the universal claim of a scientific or esoteric theory. So you can refute my theory of toddler “injustice as unfairness” by finding just one case of a toddler who doesn't care about being treated unfairly. Good luck with that!

In our age of particularism (which is the term I use to represent that relatively soft and forgiving form of relativism which I advocate), universals must be established concretely out of examples which come “from below” rather than by the *a priori* imposition of theoretical constructs “from above.” I would like to coin a new motto for a new particularistic form of hermeticism: “*as below, so above.*” Could this be the true meaning of *V.I.T.R.I.O.L.*?\* The results should be the same, of course, whether we start from above or below, but *instead of starting with the stars and projecting them upon ourselves, we would start with ourselves and project ourselves upon the stars*--which is really what we have been doing all along, anyway.

I believe that the ascendancy of particularism over universalism will lead to a *sociological* revolution in contemporary esotericism comparable to the *psychological* revolution in esotericism which took place in the last century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Aleister Crowley (whose practices I do not endorse) defined “magick” as “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will.” Dion Fortune, influenced by Carl Jung (both of them were psychoanalysts and occultists) *psychologized* this definition by asserting that magic is “the art of causing changes *in consciousness* in accordance with the will.” In our own 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the development of a *sociological* reinterpretation of esotericism,

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\* “*Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem.*” (Visit the interior of the earth and through rectification [purification] you will find the hidden [philosopher's] stone.)

influenced by post-modern philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas (the last two were kabbalists, also), will focus upon concepts such as “life world” or “lived worlds” (*die Lebenswelten*), “life forms” (*die Lebensformen*), “language games” (*Sprachspiele*), and “the other” (*différence, altérité*). That is, the earlier turn to the esoteric psychology of the individual mystic eventually requires a consideration of the esoteric sociology of the communities in which such individuals do their esoteric work. It even provides us with a criterion by which to judge an individual’s “spiritual health.” By definition, a person who believes in a narrative that is not shared by anybody else is considered insane. Is this not the fear we experience when we think of the mad scientist and his earlier counterpart of the black magician. The ancient Greeks had a word for such persons. They called them *idiots!* Of course, just as there can be pathological individuals, there can be pathological groups. In our time we are learning the dangers involved in conspiracy theories and other false narratives. Do we have any criterion by which to judge the “spiritual health” of groups? † I would suggest the biblical norm: “by their fruits ye shall know them.” [Mt.7:16]

Often described as a shift from “modernism” to “post-modernism,” this change of emphasis creates both problems and opportunities for “high degree” Freemasonry. Modernist universalism claimed that a “master-story,” a “story about storytelling” could be constructed—a “meta-narrative” which explained them all. Particularism denies this claim. For particularism, point of view matters. Every person, every group, every era has his/her/its/their own story to tell. For particularism, there is no such thing as an overarching meta-narrative. Each narrative contains its own peculiarities, even uniquenesses. Similarities are always and only a matter of “more or less.” To understand a story, one must live that story from the inside—as our story. Postmodern sciences no longer say that they can “explain everything with nothing left over” as modern sciences claimed to do. There is always something left over. Delightfully, this leaves room for *mystery!*

Anthropologists, historians, and philosophers of religion have long known that religions and other aspects of culture can look radically different whether viewed from the outside or the inside of its community; that is, what one views as important or true depends upon whether or not one is a member of the group which is under consideration. Social scientists call the outsider’s view “etic” and the insider’s view “emic.” The hermetic tradition does much the same thing by distinguishing between “esoteric” (inside) vs “exoteric” (outside) and “occult” (hidden) vs “profane” (common). ‡

Problems arise when we try to combine the exoteric (outsider’s) perspective of a universalistic meta-narrative with the esoteric (insider’s) knowledge acquired through initiation into a community—to use “etic” methods for the acquisition of “emic” wisdom. The result, in my opinion, is a caricature.

Albert Pike was one of the great nineteenth century universalists, alongside Eliphas Levi, Charles Dupuis, Max Müller, and James Frazer. Pike sought to interpret Scottish Rite through a universalistic meta-narrative which could function all on its own outside of all actual historical religions—with the possible exception of Pike’s own sectarian preference for Vedic Hinduism. That is, Pike’s “universalism” was dependent upon reductionism, primitivism, atavism, and even a covert sectarianism of his own. In effect, Pike placed a “grid” or “cookie-cutter” on top of each of the world’s religions and then trimmed away whatever did not fit within his own ideas. Pike succeeded to a limited extent. He proved that pea soup and tomato soup are both soups! But the proof is in the taste. And they still taste different.

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† A masonic brother and myself are working on this issue in our studies on “egregores.”

‡ Although each of these pairs of terms—inside vs outside; esoteric vs exoteric; emic vs etic; occult vs profane—has a slightly different use, for the purposes of this paper I will consider them as meaning about the same thing.

Scottish Rite identifies the “insiderness” of esotericism with its own particular form of universalistic “outsiderness.” Ironic? Self-contradictory? York Rite allows its esoteric teachings to emerge from within, in accordance with its narrative’s own inner logic. Its esoteric teachings should be able to weather the storms of post-modernism fairly well. That is, while Scottish Rite offers a “trickle-down” hermeneutic, York Rite practices a “bubble-up” hermeneutic—which is what I am advocating.

What about Masonic Rosicrucianism considered as a “rite” unto itself? I offer a modest proposal. I believe that Masonic Rosicrucianism can be viewed as a “third way” which I will dub “experimental esotericism.” For example, alchemy can be understood as an experimental science which, as well as having led to the development of the modern *physical* science of chemistry, is still, on its own, a *spiritual* science capable of reconfirming, through individual and group rituals (that is, its ancient esoteric scientific methods) many hermetic discoveries for the benefit of generation after generation of initiates and practitioners. Because it practices the scientific standards of verifiability, falsifiability, and repeatability, Masonic Rosicrucianism is the one place in Freemasonry which should be capable of self-renewal in the face of cultural change. As changes occur, it might even discover, by trial and error, new or previously unrecognized correspondences revealed by the evolution of cultural realities. These discoveries could prove themselves capable of fulfilling the ancient hermetic dictum, especially through the development of the active or creative “imagination”—which was expected by the romantic poets (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Yeats, Goethe) and then developed by anthroposophy (Rudolph Steiner, Owen Barfield).

If this can be shown to be true, hermetic sciences would no longer be “dead” sciences in the sense that we call Latin a “dead” language, but would “live” again by embracing the importance and validity of *both* the spiritual and the material, heaven and earth, above and below, emic and etic, esoteric and exoteric, inside and outside. Modern science ended up adopting a perspective which saw humanity as standing outside “The Everything” on a platform somehow suspended in mid-air. Hermeticism, reconceived, would see us as fully embedded in “The Everything.” Hermetic sciences would become “living” experimental sciences once again by focusing upon many various “life worlds”—communities and lifestyles—with the inner and outer realities they reveal. While other rites and degrees might seek for a “lost” word, a “true” word, or a “sacred” word, Masonic Rosicrucianism would seek for an ever-living and humanly “incarnate” word.

Quantum mechanics has uncovered many “paradoxes” which cannot be solved by modern science. Light can be either a wave or a particle depending upon how we set up the experiment. It is not possible to determine both the location and velocity of an electron at the same time. The theory of quantum entanglement states that particles once close to each other can remain causally connected even at extreme distances in such a way that a change in one particle will cause a comparable and instantaneous change in the other. Then there is Schrödinger’s famous cat which would seem to be both dead and alive at the same time. The resolution of all of these problems requires the *non-neutrality* of the observer—something which modern science has always attempted to deny. That is, observers are always part of an observation and never really stand outside. Einstein called such matters “spooky.” He considered quantum entanglement and even the law of gravity to represent “occult action at a distance” which is prohibited by the materialistic assumptions of modern science.

Neither pre-modern nor post-modern science find these matters to be problematic. They both assume that the observer is always a participant. Truth, itself, is a matter of the proper relationship between the knower and the known—*adequatio*. Concerning Schrödinger’s cat, ancient Aristotelian science simply states that its life-status is only *in potentia* until it is observed. Post-modern

science has no problem with something seeming “spooky” and hermetic science has no problem with causalities which are “occult”! In the one case, that simply means that something really *is* spooky. In the other case, even Isaac Newton admitted that the only explanation he could find which would “save the appearances” (i.e., “account for the data”) was simply to admit that gravity *was* an occult force. Interestingly, Newton wrote far more about alchemy than physics. It was the British Royal Academy of Science that impounded all Newton’s alchemical writings, suppressed them, cleaned up the records of his mental illnesses, and then passed him off as one of their “fathers” of modern science and The Enlightenment. Was modern science, itself, founded upon an historical hoax, a scientific fraud? We can even prove that Galileo fudged his data in order to make his theories work out. To this day, scientists joke about the necessity of “the fudge factor” and “finagling the data”!

Thus post-modern science more closely resembles pre-modern science than those sciences which grew out of The Enlightenment. Ancient sciences preserved and post-modern sciences have rediscovered a certain unity of fact and value, theory and application, observer and observed, which makes it possible to reveal correlations and correspondences between various realms of reality not otherwise appreciated—the relationship between the human and the divine, between the inside and the outside of both ourselves and the cosmos. Pre-moderns and post-moderns inhabit a holistic, holographic universe. They exhibit what Owen Barfield called “participation”—knowledge as the knower and the known *interpenetrating* each other. The only difference is that pre-modern science represented a largely unconscious “original” participation while post-modern science practices a mostly conscious “final” participation.

Our contemporary debate over the meaning of truth is based upon false premises and false options. Truth is *not* “absolute” existing only in the object (“objectivity”); *nor* is it “relative” existing only in the subject (“subjectivity”). Truth is found in the *relationship between* the subject and the object, the knower and the known. The ancient and medieval philosophers called this *adequatio*—the theory of truth as “adequation”—the requirement that the subject must be *adequate* to the object. Nobody has ever expressed this idea better than Plato’s account of Socrates when he said: “You cannot perceive beauty in the world unless you have beauty in your soul.”

Fritjof Capra offered a “Tao of Physics” (post-modern science plus *eastern* mysticism). I am suggesting a “Hermeneutic of Physics” (post-modern science, pre-modern science, plus *western* mysticism) as a form of science which maintains the ancient unities.

The words “hermetic” and “hermeneutic” both derive from the name “Hermes.” Hermes was the messenger (or interpreter) of the gods—the patron saint, so to speak, of what the ancients called grammar, logic, and rhetoric and what we today call the philosophy of language (semiotics, semantics, pragmatics) and “critical theory”. Natural philosophers such as Galileo and Newton (both influenced by older conceptions of science) embraced the same hermeneutic, the same theory of the interpretation of the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. They wrote that there are two books of God’s revelation—not only the Book we call Holy Scripture which is written in Hebrew and Greek, but also the Book of Nature which is written in the language of mathematics.

Remember that in ancient thought from Pythagoras on down, mathematics included what we today would call both “facts” *and* “values.” For the ancients, there was no such thing as “value-free” knowledge which could be acquired without the initiation and transformation of the knower. The acquisition of wisdom or virtue cannot take place without changing the very nature of our souls.

Unless there is change “within” we don’t really know much of anything significant about the universe “without.” The unchanged knower knows nothing. The unchanged knower doesn’t even know—as Socrates did—that, ultimately, all we know is that we know nothing.

I realize that there is an element of high irony to be found in my making these claims. After all, not so long ago I was still an “outsider” when it came to Masonic Rosicrucianism, rather than an actual initiate and participant in “group” hermeticism. The tradition is not really mine—yet! Can one be an “insider” all alone? I do not think so. My private studies of Rosicrucianism “from the outside” have led me to want to try out this claim that Rosicrucianism can be conceived of as a continuing and experimental “spiritual science” with spiritual frontiers still to explore and spiritual discoveries yet to be made. Now I look forward to finding out whether my participation “inside” of an actual Rosicrucian order will verify or falsify these hunches which I have been sharing with college students and colleagues since the 1970s. An answer either way would constitute, for me, my **Magnum Opus**.

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Owen Barfield. *Saving the Appearances*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1957) and (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965) reprinted (Middletown CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1988).

Morris Berman. *The Reenchantment of the World*. (Cornell Univ. Press, 1981) and (NY: Bantam Books, 1984).