

Super-epistemology

DAVID BATES

The autonomy of thought

Esoteric thought, no matter where we draw its elusive boundary around the many mystical, illuminist and theosophical currents, in some sense can always be identified as a claim to ‘higher knowledge’.¹ This epistemological excess can of course only be defined in terms of a more conservative epistemology that underlies some mainstream form of enquiry. Indeed, a distinctly esoteric claim to knowledge can really emerge only alongside a specifically modern delimitation of knowledge – namely, the restriction of all legitimate enquiry to the kind of knowledge acquired by an autonomous, embodied human mind. Until the advent of modernity epistemological conceptions were always penetrated by metaphysical, cosmic and divine understandings of our place in the world. Esoterism as a claim to higher knowledge is therefore a relatively new phenomenon, for it can exist only after the separation of a space for a specifically human form of cognition, a space protected from all these other spheres of thought. This point has often been obscured – by academic genealogies of esoteric thinking as much as by modern esoterics’ own self-understanding as inheritors of venerable traditions and practices.

Without locating the origins of this modernity in some specific moment or figure, the key turning point in the history of epistemology was the delineation of a field of enquiry that was understood to be finite and accessible to the human mind. It is true that even scholastic theology never really denied the capacities of human cognition. Human thinking in general, however, and reasoning in particular were never considered to be privileged epistemological tools. The results of rational deduction were themselves entirely parasitic on a preliminary form of knowledge that was wholly external to the operations of the human mind. Investigations of the natural world, then, were inherently structured by other kinds of knowledge.² The crucial transformation for modern thought was the establishment of a new space for the pursuit of knowledge, a

1. Kocku von Stuckrad, ‘Western esotericism: towards an integrative model of interpretation’, *Religion* 35 (2005), p.78-97 (88).
2. Antoine Faivre, *L’Esotérisme au XVIII^e siècle en France et en Allemagne* (Paris, 1973), p.44.

space fully available to a purely human investigation. This kind of knowledge was understood to be autonomous. That is, the knowledge gained in this sphere would be valid without any support and (just as important) without any interruption or influence from metaphysical, theological or cosmic forms of understanding. Wherever we may locate this turning point, it is crucial to recognise that modern thought begins not with the rejection of all metaphysical, cosmic or theological claims, but rather with the preliminary identification of a sphere of autonomous human knowledge, namely, the finite natural world. For example, as Ernst Cassirer suggested, we might plausibly identify this turn as early as the fifteenth century, when Nicolas of Cusa argued that only with an understanding of the finite world in its own terms would any grasp of divinity at all be possible. Wherever we first locate it, the crucial idea is that the finite world demanded its own particular form of investigation.³

Politically, culturally and intellectually, the autonomous sphere of human enquiry had to compete with traditional epistemologies for pre-eminence. This is why the field of natural philosophy was, in the Renaissance, still very much open to metaphysical, theological and even occult knowledge practices.⁴ But it would be a mistake to see these fluid kinds of enquiry as esoteric claims to higher knowledge. The assumption was that the finite world held secret connections to cosmic truths, truths that would only ever be revealed by intense study of nature itself.⁵ In this historical moment, it would be more accurate to say that a certain kind of natural philosophy was beginning to define itself as the claim to a peculiarly 'lower' form of knowledge – one that was, nonetheless, radically autonomous and hence of significant value.⁶ Epistemological conflicts erupted in the early modern period precisely as this new field of enquiry became increasingly important, with the result that human investigations of nature inevitably began to invade the territory of theological and metaphysical knowledge. These conflicts were as much about the status of natural philosophy as an autonomous epistemological form as they were about the actual content of the knowledge claims produced in this new zone of enquiry. The case of Galileo is paradigmatic. From the perspective of institutional Church authority, it was

3. Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the cosmos in Renaissance philosophy*, translated by Mario Domandi (Philadelphia, PA, 1963).
4. On the interpenetration of spheres in early modern natural philosophy, see William Eamon, *Science and the secrets of nature: books of secrets in medieval and early modern culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1994) and Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the hermetic tradition* (Chicago, 1964). Compare K. von Stuckrad, *Western esotericism: a brief history of secret knowledge*, translated by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (London, 2005), esp. ch.5.
5. Cassirer, *Individual*, p.28-29.
6. Brian Vickers, 'Analogy versus identity: the rejection of occult symbolism, 1580-1680', in *Occult and scientific mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. B. Vickers (Cambridge, 1984), p.95-163.

enough that he admit the superiority of a theological claim when it was opposed by a natural scientific one.

True esoterism, a truly modern esoterism, could only emerge after this autonomous and limited space of enquiry was consolidated and defended as a privileged form of knowledge with the rise of the new science and the movement we call the scientific revolution. Once a certain empirical epistemological zone was not only conceptualised but, more importantly, privileged as a superior space of knowledge during the seventeenth century, only then could the breaching of these border zones of the finite constitute a competing claim to higher truth. It is hardly surprising, then, that esoteric thought (in all of its wildly diverse forms) becomes so visible in the period of the Enlightenment, precisely that time when the methodology of the new science was being generalised and extended into all kinds of knowledge production, elevating the relatively modest epistemology of the finite into a dominant (perhaps even domineering) form of cultural power. In the eighteenth century, this epistemology would be underwritten by new and comprehensive theories of human cognition that ultimately precluded competing forms of enquiry. In a complete reversal of earlier intellectual structures, then, the Enlightenment forced all epistemological claims back onto the limited terrain of the human cognitive subject.

What I want to suggest here is that what we are calling the Super-Enlightenment was not, as we might first expect, simply an attempt to escape the limitations imposed by a modest Enlightenment conception of empirical knowledge. It would be much too literal to say that the Super-Enlightenment goes 'beyond' empirical claims to reach a higher form of knowledge, a supra-sensible realm of understanding. From the start, the modern mind was always configured in relationship to what was outside thinking. The mind was, in other words, positioned as capable of extending itself beyond its own borders. This was the very foundation of any epistemological claim about the world, whether scientific or not. As I will show, all epistemology was in a sense super-epistemology, once the human mind was defined as an autonomous entity. The real distinction between Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment emerged in the conflicts over the status of this new cognitive subject that had been elevated to epistemological pre-eminence. The main battle of modern epistemology in the wake of the scientific revolution was over how to think about the beyond of thought that structured any epistemological theory in this period.

A more precise way of formulating the distinction between Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment would be this: how was super-epistemology conceptualised with respect to the human cognitive subject, and what kinds of enquiry did it authorise? The mainstream of Enlight-

enment thinkers were, it seems to me, mostly interested in how to pursue connections between sensible experiences and the 'beyond' that produced these experiences. They focused on the zones of interactivity, the liminal spaces between thinking and non-thinking spheres. They would assert the independence of the mind without ever claiming some kind of absolute self-possession or direct access to external realities. Super-Enlightenment figures, by contrast, concentrated on the very presence of the beyond within human thought as a way of pursuing the path to truth. For them, the mind was a privileged site for the intersection of metaphysical, cosmic and divine forces beyond thought and independent of thought. Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment epistemologies both developed from the modern shift that centred knowledge on a specifically human form of thinking. The differences depended on how the 'outside' beyond this kind of thinking was structured within embodied human experience itself.

Modern super-epistemology

Descartes most clearly articulated this foundational modern position, where all knowledge of nature is circumscribed as the knowledge of a finite, material creation, a universe that will be known only through the proper functioning of the autonomous human mind. While the Cartesian subject to this day is still caricatured as a self-possessed entity with clear boundaries separating it from some 'external' body and world, in fact Descartes believed that the human mind, taken as a whole, was a complex liminal entity.⁷ Human cognition was fully immersed in a material universe described in resolutely physical terms, even as it simultaneously held activities and capacities that operated in some way outside of this mechanical domain. For Descartes, the purely intellectual capacity of the human mind did not so much transcend the sensible forms of corporeal cognition as haunt those sensible forms from within. The pure intellect operated only within the terrain of the somatic. Cartesian epistemology was predicated on the liminal quality of a complex cognitive space, and not simply on the abstracted capacities of the rational intellect. Knowledge, that is, was gained only in the analysis and interpretation of specific somatic information. The intellect appeared and acted only at the very limits of the sensible.

Descartes understood reason to be that capacity of the mind to go beyond the content of its own cognition – not, to be sure, the capacity of the mind to leave behind the mechanical world altogether. The Cartesian concept of reason marked a fundamental transformation of prior

7. René Descartes, *Principes de la philosophie*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris, 1983), 11 vols., 9:2, p.1-325, section 9.

scholastic thought and in an important sense made possible the kind of empiricism we will eventually associate with the Enlightenment. Reason for Descartes was cognitive, and not, as it was in scholastic philosophy, discursive.⁸ Reason was no longer the ability to move from one truth to another via pure abstraction, but instead the rather strange capacity of the mind to extricate itself from its own concrete ground, to go beyond its substantial immediacy while remaining fully attached to its own concreteness. Reason, as Descartes tried to explain in his early unfinished work *Rules for the direction of the human mind*, was an immediate, intuitive grasping of a relation within experience. It was self-grounding – this intuition was certain but it was also spontaneous – and thus self-legitimizing. While Descartes would describe this capacity as ‘a sort of spark of the divine’, the end result was in fact to solidify the autonomy of the rational mind.⁹ For intuition was always an intuition of something as it appeared within one’s own mental experience.¹⁰ The grasping of a melody, for example, was an act of comprehension that went beyond the immediate apprehension of the individual notes, but of course there is no melody without these sensible forms. Metaphorically speaking, then, Cartesian epistemology was predicated on this ability to grasp complex ‘melodic’ relations within the experiences gained concretely from our material sensory systems, including memory and the corporeal imagination.¹¹

This is why Descartes’s philosophically momentous effort to isolate a pure form of thought that functioned autonomously, distinct from all (potentially deceptive) sensory information, was such a profoundly difficult task. As we see clearly in the *Meditations*, Descartes cannot easily reject sensation because the body constantly produces a flow of organised information, information that the intellect must struggle to penetrate. The intellect can never retreat to some pure space of thinking because, as Descartes will show, pure intellect is never really capable of functioning strictly on its own terms, at least for very long. Significantly, the essence of Cartesian intellect lies in its ability to see connections and relationships as they appear within the domain of sensible corporeal

8. Stephen Gaukroger, *Cartesian logic: an essay on Descartes’ conception of inference* (Oxford, 1989), p.127-28.

9. Descartes, *Rules for the direction of the human mind*, in *The Philosophical writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1985), vol.1, p.7-77, rule 4, p.17. See Gaukroger, *Cartesian logic*, p.70.

10. Descartes, *Rules*, rule 3, p.14

11. See Matthew Jones, ‘Descartes’ geometry as spiritual exercise’, *Critical inquiry* 28 (2001), p.40-71 (60-62); Dennis Sepper, *Descartes’s imagination: proportion, images, and the activity of thinking* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), p.41-45, 55; Betsy Newell Decyk, ‘Cartesian imagination and perspectival art’, in *Descartes’ natural philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster and John Sutton (London, 2000), p.447-86.

thought. The paradigm of pure thinking, for Descartes, is therefore the rational judgement. With the famous example of the malleable, ever-changeable wax, Descartes shows in the second meditation how the rational mind is able to ‘see’ something that is never actually fully visible, never quite sensible – namely the wax itself, the identity that persists across these diverse sensible forms. The demonstration of this capacity for judgement proves that thinking in its very nature always exceeds the sensory. A relationship does not exist in the ideas that occupy the mind; rather the intellect can perceive relations between these ideas. And so for Descartes, the leap of judgement that produces insight constitutes the mind as structurally ‘other’ than its actual empirical content. But crucially, the intellect is portrayed as essentially parasitic on the corporeal forms of cognition that provide the opportunities for rational thought. The intellect has no content of its own – intellectual thinking inhabits, or better haunts, the actual concrete site of cognition that is the physical body. Descartes’s identification of the pineal gland in the brain as the specific space of interaction was often mocked. Yet the very instability of this ‘space’ that harbours simultaneously a non-spatial mode of thought helps us to mark an important conceptual turn in the history of modern epistemology. Knowledge of the physical universe will be gained by a mind that exists fully within the terrain of its epistemological object while remaining structurally beyond it in an important sense.

Cartesian science was therefore thoroughly grounded in the mechanical worldview even as Descartes asserted that the mind was not fully reducible to its physical instantiation. This was not paradoxical. Descartes likened human knowledge of the world to a kind of re-creation of the universe created by God. Just as we may know a human-made machine by understanding the relationship between its parts, we can know the universe by grasping the relations that constitute its structure. Descartes never implied that the mind could somehow ‘know’ the mind of God by transcending its own physicality. The mind, however, could make use of pure intellect to mimic the formal quality of divine knowledge by conjecturing the necessary relationships that govern this particular machine. Descartes’s physics, and his physiology, was an epistemological project that relied on the grasping of certain relationships deduced from our intuitions of a world given to us in our senses.¹² Cartesian theory was essentially hypothetical and conjectural, because knowledge was gained only in the surpassing of the empirically given. To understand nature was to (virtually) re-create the unseen with the mind,

12. See Descartes, *Le Monde* (*Ceuvres complètes*, vol.11,p.119-202) and his *Traité de l’homme* (*Ceuvres complètes*, vol.11,p.3-118). See Daniel Garber, *Descartes embodied: reading Cartesian philosophy through Cartesian science* (Cambridge, 2001).

to conceive of how something had to come to be given the foundational principles of matter intuitively grasped by the intellect. The proof of the method was not some seeing into the mind of God; more prosaically, Descartes believed that confirmation of our conjectural work would consist in the agreement of the present world's behaviour with the necessary behaviour of the virtual one.¹³

There is still a persistent belief that Descartes was a 'rationalist' and therefore had only a marginal role to play in the development of a modern experimental scientific methodology in this period, a methodology that would underwrite Enlightenment epistemologies. As Larry Laudan for one has shown, however, influential experimentalists had much in common with Descartes, and in fact learnt a great deal from him.¹⁴ Robert Boyle, for example, believed that the human mind was not something that could ever be understood solely in terms of mechanical philosophy. Instead he saw human intelligence as more or less analogous with divine creativity. More specifically, Boyle's experimental method, while it no doubt drew heavily on Bacon's inductive methodological principles, was at its heart hypothetical in nature. As Descartes had already shown, the direct observation of the world only takes us so far. Inevitably, the raw material of experimental and observational data had to be supplemented. Boyle realised that this hypothetical conjecture about what always lies beyond human experience constituted the essence of scientific epistemology.¹⁵ Here, Boyle was only reaffirming Galileo's own emphasis on the active, creative dimension of scientific knowledge. Galileo repeatedly invoked hypothetical thinking, even conjectural fictions, as a necessary starting point of enquiry.¹⁶

The key issue, as Boyle argued, was that our conjectures about the invisible world should eventually be confirmed, or at least probabilistically affirmed, once our actual experimental observations turned out to be in agreement with what our virtual models would lead us to expect. Boyle was thus neither an inductivist nor a pure empiricist.

13. Descartes, *Principes*, sections 43 and 201.

14. Larry Laudan, *Science and hypothesis: historical essays on scientific methodology*, (Dordrecht, 1981), p.27-58.

15. Robert Boyle, *Certain physiological essays and other tracts*, in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, 14 vols (London, 1999-2000), vol.2, p.3-24 (4); *About the excellency and grounds of the mechanical hypothesis*, in *Works*, vol.8, p.99-116 (114-15); *Experiments, notes, etc., about the mechanical origine or production of divers particular qualities*, in *Works*, vol.8, p.315-523 (325). See Rose-Mary Sargent, *The Diffident naturalist: Robert Boyle and the philosophy of experiment* (Chicago, 1995), p.55-80.

16. Paul Feyerabend, *Against method: outline of an anarchistic theory of science* (London, 1993); Barry Gower, *Scientific method: an historical and philosophical introduction* (London, 1997); A. C. Crombie, *Robert Grosseteste and the origins of experimental science 1100-1700* (Oxford, 1962); Laudan, *Science and hypothesis*.

The mind, precisely because of its non-mechanical origin, was able to see in its own way the deep truths of nature – to understand nature was to understand how it was constructed, in other words, to understand some aspect of divine creation, to ‘read the Stenography of God’s omniscient hand’, as Boyle put it.¹⁷ Admittedly, and here he seemed to part with Descartes, Boyle was more than open to the possibility of more direct revelations of truth. He once speculated how God might aid us by ‘supernaturally directing the naturalist’s attention to “those happy and pregnant hints” that [...] might lead to scientific discoveries’.¹⁸ It seems as if Boyle believed that we might even be able to contact other kinds of spiritual beings. These epistemological speculations were not at all opposed to the experimentalist methodology Boyle was developing. They grew out of possibilities opened up from within the new redefinition of human intelligence that grounded this methodology – an intelligence that penetrated the natural world through its creative use of conjectural and hypothetical constructions. For Boyle, as for many other empirically minded scientists in this period, human thought was, to be sure, positioned within the material existence of the universe, yet it pointed at the same time beyond itself and, beyond that materiality, to the very structure and purpose of that material machine.

So how do we explain the Enlightenment rejection of Cartesian science and the rejection of ‘hypothesis’ in favour of proper empirical investigation that looked back to Bacon? To start, we have to see that Newton’s infamous rejection of hypothesis – which was so influential in early Enlightenment thinking – was rather misleading. For even as Newton set aside what he thought was empty speculation, those purely fictional hypotheses, his own scientific work depended heavily on the kind of conjectural leaps both Boyle and Descartes performed in their own studies.¹⁹ There was a difference, then, between the kind of undisciplined speculation that just masqueraded as enquiry and a measured hypothetical approach that relied on observational and rational foundations, and which could (at least theoretically) be affirmed by future experimental work. Newton was of course more than willing to entertain conceptual possibilities that went well beyond the mechanistic worldview, most obviously with the idea of the attractive force of gravity. Newton went far beyond Descartes when he hypothesised such ‘forces’ that were not reducible to the merely physical relations of matter in motion. From this vantage, Newton’s infamous lifelong interest in

17. Sargent, *Diffident naturalist*, p.210.

18. Jan Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the limits of reason* (Cambridge, 1997), p.42. See Boyle, *Some considerations touching the usefulness of experimental natural philosophy*, in *Works*, vol.3, p.233-94 (200, 276).

19. Gower, *Scientific method*, ch.4.

alchemy might be characterised not as a strange aberration from a sober, empirical, inductive methodology but, instead, as Richard Westfall has suggested, as an important stimulus for concepts that could aid in the conjectural understanding of a complex universe that defied straightforward mechanical modelling.²⁰ This is to say that Newton was not ‘doing’ alchemy so much as he was using alchemical technologies and ideas to open up new epistemological paths in physics. Newtonian science was therefore deeply entangled with other efforts to rethink mechanism in the seventeenth century, which would include Boyle’s interest in what he called the ‘cosmical qualities’ in nature, as well as the concept of ‘plastic nature’ developed by the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, and later taken up by Leibniz.²¹

What makes this late-seventeenth-century moment so interesting is the tantalising homology between a mechanical creation seemingly animated by principles of order that exceeded mechanistic forces, and an embodied mind capable of tracing connections beyond the immediacy of bodily sensation. The great metaphysical systems of this period (most notably those of Spinoza and Leibniz) were erected on just this foundational homology. Without ever denying the mechanical philosophy and the mathematical physics that it grounded, the metaphysicists seized upon the extrinsic principles of order as they appeared in nature (and most obviously in organic nature) and in the higher dimensions of human thought, in order to link human intelligence and cosmic order tightly together.²² Not surprisingly, epistemology was of secondary importance in these systems of thought, precisely because the actual practices of knowledge (as developed in the new science) were here transformed, so to speak, into occasions for rather abstract reflection on the nature of a divinely ordered cosmos. The autonomous human mind, seen as a seeker of knowledge, was diminished, redefined as just one single facet of an intricately enfolded cosmic structure.²³

Essential to the development of modern epistemology, then, was the prescription that knowledge would only be achieved through an actual

20. Richard Westfall, ‘Newton and alchemy’, in *Occult and scientific mentalities*, p.315-35 (330). See also Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton’s alchemy, or ‘The Hunting of the Greene Lyon’* (Cambridge, 1975).

21. On Boyle, see John Henry, ‘Robert Boyle and cosmical qualities’, in *Robert Boyle reconsidered*, ed. Michael Hunter (Cambridge, 1994), p.119-38, and William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, *Alchemy tried in the fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the fate of helmontian chymistry* (Chicago, 2002); on Cudworth and Leibniz, see E. Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, translated by James P. Pettigrove (Austin, TX, 1953).

22. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Considerations sur les principes de vie, et sur les natures plastiques*, in *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols (Berlin, 1875-1890), vol.6, p.539-55.

23. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis, MN, 1993).

investigation into the finite world of our embodied sensible existence. The metaphysicians were right to think that cognition was always about rational judgement, and not mere perception, and this meant that any model of human thought had to embrace analogical and conjectural modes of understanding. For the Enlightenment, however, epistemology would be defined by the systematic investigation of this power of judgement within concrete human subjects, as they navigated their experiential world and the larger universe that this experience revealed to them.

Enlightenment minds and the supernatural

The first real effort to analyse the specifically human capacity for knowledge in the wake of the new science was Locke. The *Essay concerning human understanding* was read, and can still be read, as a manifesto of a new modest empiricism, an empiricism no longer confined to the sphere of natural science. Locke wants to limit epistemological questions to questions about sensations and their ‘transformation’ within the space of the human mind, and he does famously prohibit empty speculation about the invisible ‘essences’ of things. In other words, Locke lays down a strict limit to human cognition, one that was (unfortunately) too often breached by lazy or overly enthusiastic minds.

Trained in medicine, Locke was of course fully immersed in the mechanical philosophy and in the mechanical physiology developed in figures such as Descartes, Willis and Hobbes.²⁴ This physiology encouraged a rather materialistic approach to the activity of the mind, although most (with the exception of Hobbes perhaps) would agree that something essential to thinking escaped complete mechanical reduction. At any rate, Locke was also interested in many other topics, including (along with Newton) theology and alchemy. In fact, Locke and Newton corresponded extensively about alchemy – having uncovered Boyle’s own alchemical reflections after his death, which they decided to keep secret. Like Newton, it seems as if Locke gained something by conceptualising human thinking in ‘alchemical’ terms. For once the delimitation of knowledge as transformed sensation was accomplished; Locke proceeded to get deeply entangled in the complexity of an internal space where certain mental relations, networks of connectivity, constituted the core of human knowledge.

Though ideas can, Locke argued, be taken apart and recombined arbitrarily after they arrive in the ‘closet’ of the mind, he was more than aware of the epistemological difficulty this conception creates. How

24. Patrick Romanell, *John Locke and medicine: a new key to Locke* (Buffalo, NY, 1984).

would the manipulation of sensible ideas take us beyond the mere experience of ideas? In response, Locke argued that one could not in fact easily move from ideas to knowledge of some external ‘reality’. The mind, however, can discover another kind of truth through a patient and careful elucidation of the connections between ideas, which are not at all inevitably arbitrary. Like Descartes, Locke founded true knowledge on the intuitive insight the mind acquires when it grasps the inner connection (or radical disconnection) between two ideas, ideas that in and of themselves revealed no such necessary relation. With an echo of Descartes, Locke says that this kind of insight is beyond discursive understanding – it is immediate and intuitive, and is therefore self-grounding: ‘in the Discovery of, and Assent to these Truths, there is no use of the discursive Faculty, *no need of Reasoning*, but they are known by a superior, and higher degree of Evidence.’²⁵ Knowledge, then, was gained through a cognitive capacity to trace out these intuitive connections between sensible ideas, and not by constructing some representational picture of a reality that was beyond thinking and inaccessible to thinking.

Locke’s epistemology was therefore inherently analogical.²⁶ Any insight into the nature of the world beyond our thinking would be gained by the accumulation of insights into the inner connectivity of our own ideas. At times he described these insights as in effect coming from God. ‘When we find out an *Idea*, by whose intervention we discover the Connexion of two others, this is Revelation from God to us, by the Voice of Reason.’²⁷ He more than once speculated on the kind of thinking performed by angelic intelligences that were not restricted by a corporeal sensibility.²⁸ Still, it is crucial to see that, for Locke, the insight that produced these ‘sparks of bright knowledge’ from within our own somatic experience was not structured as the actual presence of some higher knowledge, the presence, that is, of a specific kind of cognitive content.²⁹ Lockean insight was framed as the simulation of a higher degree of knowledge, understood as a comprehensive and simultaneous perception of all relational connections. The point is that, while the kind of insight that grounded human knowledge was structured as something that exceeded the actual materiality of sensible ideas, this insight could only appear between actual experiences as they appeared in our minds.

25. John Locke, *Essay concerning human understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford, 1979), book 4, ch.17, section 14, p.683.

26. See Laudan, *Science and hypothesis*, ch.5; compare Locke, *Essay*, book 4, ch.16.

27. Locke, *Essay*, book 4, ch.7, section 11, p.598.

28. See John Yolton, *Two intellectual worlds of John Locke: man, person, and spirits in the ‘Essay’* (Ithaca, NY, 2004).

29. Locke, *Essay*, book 4, ch.17, section 15, p.683.

The ‘modest’ aspect of Locke’s epistemology, its restriction, that is, to an analysis of sensible ideas, has been celebrated as the origin of a modern epistemology in the Enlightenment – both in the eighteenth century and today. The other side of Locke’s theory, however, namely this emphasis on tracing genuine connections within experience to produce insight, was equally important for the development of Enlightenment epistemology. Enlightenment figures in the mainstream of scientific theory and practice always acknowledged the foundational importance of such insight for the progress of human knowledge, even as they polemically dismissed any superficial claims to higher knowledge. While it is true that, in the battles over Newtonian method in the early eighteenth century, the conjectural and the hypothetical dimension of investigation was somewhat muted,³⁰ in the wake of Mme Du Châtelet’s 1740 defence of hypothesis in the *Institutions physiques*, an important debate on the nature of scientific discovery opened up, with the creative dimension of human cognition returning to the fore.

D’Alembert’s important methodological articles on science in the *Encyclopédie*, for example, repeatedly emphasised the capacity of the human mind to leap beyond observational information, to bring our sensible ideas together in order to reveal connections and relations that would ground a theoretical understanding of nature. Praising both conjecture and analogy, ‘ces deux talens précieux et si rares’, as he put it, D’Alembert highlighted the importance of going beyond experience if one was going to make true discoveries. As he wrote,

Au reste, quand je proscriis de la Physique la manie des explications, je suis bien éloigné d’en proscrire cet esprit de conjecture, qui tout-à-la-fois timide & éclairé conduit quelquefois à des découvertes, pourvû qu’il se donne pour ce qu’il est, jusqu’à ce qu’il soit arrivé à la découverte réelle: cet esprit d’analogie, dont la sage hardiesse perce au delà de ce que la nature semble vouloir montrer, & prévoit les faits, avant que de les avoir vûs.³¹

Of course, this celebration of conjecture and analogy must be understood within the specific context of scientific methodology. D’Alembert speaks of the ability of the mind to sense relations, to ‘foresee’ facts before they appear – which is another way of saying that the mind’s hypothetical capacities were always to be confirmed by actual observation and experimentation. ‘Le génie’ wrote another *philosophe*,

est donc cette vue perçante de l’ame, qui saisit tout d’un coup toutes les idées relatives à l’objet qui l’occupe, qui les examine séparément, qui démêle d’abord au milieu d’elles ce qui peut éclairer, & qui par cet examen complet,

30. See Jeff Loveland, *Rhetoric and natural history: Buffon in polemical and literary context*, SVEC 2001:03, ch.4

31. *Encyclopédie*, s.v. ‘Experimental’.

prompt & heureux s'élançent vers des vérités sublimes, & déchire le voile sombre que la Nature opposoit à des efforts ordinaires.³²

Enlightenment thinkers clearly distinguished, however, between this opening up of the path to knowledge through rhetorical fictions, and the misguided effort to ground epistemological claims entirely on analogy and conjecture.³³

Hume, in the *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, famously exposed the dangers of analogical thinking as a foundation for knowledge claims, though Hume's own *Treatise* acknowledges that human knowledge was dependent on the analogical structuring of resemblance among our ideas. Hume of course despaired of any possibility of certainty or even probabilistic confidence emerging from these mental networks of organisation.³⁴ In a similar fashion, Condillac, in his influential critique of systems, argued that too often thinkers were willing to elevate as truth a mere associative connection that could well turn out to be erroneous. At the same time, Condillac's own philosophy (one that extolled the Enlightenment virtues of patience and limitation) explored the central importance of analogical connection in the progressive movement of human thought. For Condillac, we were never merely sensing beings. Epistemology was not, therefore, simply a move from 'experience' to knowledge of the world. The knowing mind was characterised by its ability to form connections, to construct networks of relations between pieces of sensory information – hence the crucial importance of the linguistic sign in Condillac's thinking, for it was in language that the mind could forge new pathways that exceeded the merely contingent connection of ideas. With echoes of Leibnizian monadology, Condillac suggested that our own path to self-knowledge pointed the way to insight into the divine creation itself.³⁵ The experience of our bodies opened up spaces of insight into structures of order that appeared within our somatic experience but were understood to be independent of the material concreteness of those experiences.

What is worth emphasising here is the structure of Condillac's epistemological theory. Even as he relentlessly circumscribed the space of knowledge to the realm of sensory experience, the essential core of progressive knowledge was linked to what escaped mere sensation, that

32. Jean Senebier, *L'Art d'observer*, 2 vols (Geneva, Cl. Philibert & Bart. Chirol, 1775), vol.1, p.15.

33. John Bender, 'Enlightenment fiction and the scientific hypothesis', *Representations* 68 (1998), p.6-28.

34. On analogy and cognition, see David Hume, *Treatise on human nature: being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), p.142-47; D. Hume, *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge, 2007).

35. See my *Enlightenment aberrations: error and Revolution in France* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), ch.3.

is, the formal analogical relations that could exist only on a plane of meaning perceived via the processes of abstraction and comparison. As he demonstrated in his *De l'art de raisonner*, and the late *Langue des calculs*, reason was just another name for the tracing of analogical extensions of experience that would form the basis of wholly new networks of knowledge.³⁶

Drawing on Enlightenment epistemology, especially as it was developed by Condillac, Rousseau depicted the human being as a peculiar animal, a physical, concrete entity that nonetheless had no predictable identity. In the *Second discourse*, Rousseau showed how human reasoning distanced human identity from its actual material existence. In order for Rousseau even to imagine a human being in a pure state of nature, living among the animals, he had to strip him of what he calls 'tous les dons surnaturels'.³⁷ At first glance, this might imply that human beings, qua human, have the 'presence' of some divine capacity. And of course, Rousseau does tell us that language and abstract thought (which are inextricably intertwined) are in fact evidence of these divine gifts. But what does he really mean by this? What constitutes the human, as 'outside' or beyond nature, is not the presence of some identifiable 'capacity' but rather the inability to be defined wholly by any of the natural characteristics that structure our bodily life. As Rousseau explained, the ability to compare ideas, to see relations, to note analogies and imitate others' behaviour, these cognitive capacities all stem from our ability to not be in the moment that we are in fact experiencing. The human mind is to a certain extent a sensing instrument. But its true nature as a mind is not to be what it is – it can step back out of its own content and thereby rethink it, not by leaving the body and travelling to some other sphere, to be sure, but by reorganising it and thereby revealing something new. The mind is able to take a position beyond the presence of thought within the realm of thinking itself. When Rousseau says that human nature is 'surnaturel', literally beyond nature, he means that there is always a structural gap between, on the one hand, the content of our thought as presence and, on the other hand, this insight into relations that produce a new knowledge (not to mention a new social and political being) from within the very concreteness of an embodied, animalistic experience.

36. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *De l'art de raisonner* and *Grammaire*, in *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Georges Le Roy, 3 vols (Paris, 1947-1951), vol.1; and Condillac, *La Langue des calculs* (Lille, 1981).

37. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols (Paris, 1959-1995), vol.3, p.109-223 (134).

What is Super-Enlightenment?

Once we recognise that Enlightenment epistemology was at its heart a super-epistemology, dependent as it was on a concept of mental connectivity that exceeded any materialist causality, we can see how this Enlightenment cognitive subject in effect prepares the ground for an esoteric reconceptualisation of the self. This new self pointed to a whole new epistemological model that would end up contesting Enlightenment frameworks of understanding. As Antoine Faivre has noted, in the eighteenth century, the inner life of human experience became a contested terrain.³⁸ Epistemologically, the conflict centred on the nature of the excess of cognitive functioning that marked human intelligence as having that capacity to move beyond mere sensory experience towards knowledge of the world.

Paradoxically, perhaps, this Enlightenment articulation of an autonomous knowing self helped pave the way for a rediscovery of earlier mystical and occult thinkers who put the self at the centre of their own theories of cosmic and divine orders. The renewed interest in figures such as Meister Eckhart and especially Jakob Böhme (as well as ancient authorities such as Plato and Plotinus), namely those who argued for God's very presence in the individual soul, can be understood not as a return to some intellectual tradition interrupted by modern materialist science, but instead as a recuperation of the autonomous self that was produced from within the matrix of modern scientific thought.³⁹ Ernst Benz, some time ago, argued that the mystical ideas of medieval and early modern Europe constituted a revolutionary redescription of the absolute, as a 'spark' of the divine manifested inside our own selves, and not as something transcendent and far beyond.⁴⁰ While no doubt true, it strikes me that it was the development of a modern super-epistemology, and the privileging of the autonomous self that accompanied it, that forged a space where new efforts to reconnect the human and the divine on the very plane of subjectivity were made possible.

Many of the occult and esoteric theories of the self studied by Benz, those resurrected by the figures of the Super-Enlightenment, were of course originally forged on the battlegrounds of theological dispute in the Reformation. For example, Böhme's idea that the inner world of experience was a path to divine understanding and salvation emerged precisely at the moment when conflicts over the nature of religious experience erupted in the context of theological critiques of institutional religious authority. In the eighteenth century, in contrast,

38. See Faivre, *L'Esotérisme*, p.33.

39. Faivre, *L'Esotérisme*, p.37.

40. Ernst Benz, *Les Sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande* (Paris, 1968), ch.1-2.

Böhme's thinking animated a radically different perspective. The idea that the self could be a site for cosmic and divine forces was, in the period of Enlightenment, a weapon in the struggle over the nature of human knowledge and human identity. Taking up the Enlightenment emphasis on the mind's capacity for analogical and conjectural connectivity, Super-Enlightenment thinkers freed themselves from the rather constrained methodologies of mainstream philosophy and natural history by adopting – out of context – occult theories of cosmic connectivity from the Renaissance and Reformation notions of inner religious experience. Super-Enlightenment was therefore not so much a return to older analogical epistemologies, theosophical practices and occult ontologies as it was a strategic redefinition of a modern cognitive model using the resources of older intellectual traditions, including of course Christianity itself.

What gave the Super-Enlightenment effort to reconfigure the self as a site of a pathway to higher forms of being great impetus was the emergence, around mid-century, of intense debates in natural philosophical circles on the problematic nature of 'order' in the universe. Observation, experimentation and theoretical reflection on the ways matter ordered itself, especially in the organic forms of life, encouraged innovative new thinking, in particular on the issue of biological reproduction. The resurgence of vitalism in the Enlightenment, alongside new thinking on the nature of electricity and magnetism, and methodological developments in non-mathematical sciences such as geography and natural history, all significantly influenced the formation of new epistemological models, models that highlighted the special significance of analogical and hypothetical models of enquiry.⁴¹ Insight into the rather mysterious nature of 'life' and 'order' within nature necessitated a new way of thinking about human knowledge.

The figure of Emmanuel Swedenborg exemplifies the slippage between Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment in the most dramatic fashion. In his early career, he was a strict mechanist interested in Cartesian explanations of the natural world. In the 1730s, however, Swedenborg began to question the possibility of a purely mechanistic interpretation of human life. Drawing on influences such as Leibniz, Swedenborg left mechanical philosophy behind and began some very

41. Peter Hans Reill, *Vitalizing nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and pathology: sensibility in the literature and medicine of eighteenth-century France* (Baltimore, MD, 1998); Jessica Riskin, *Science in the age of sensibility: the sentimental empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2002); Loveland, *Rhetoric and natural history*; Philip Sloan, 'L'hypothétisme de Buffon: sa place dans la philosophie des sciences du dix-huitième siècle', in *Buffon 88: actes du colloque international pour le bicentenaire de la mort de Buffon*, ed. Jean Gayon (Paris, 1992), p.207-22.

original and provocative investigations into the structure of the human brain, all with the goal of understanding how the human 'soul' could operate within, but also outside, its material embodiment.⁴² In this natural philosophical work, Swedenborg was interested in the kind of intuitive cognition that marked human intelligence, and the relationship between human souls and the spirit (*anima*) literally animating organic life.⁴³ This turn in his scientific thinking was a transitional moment, one that prepared in some way the most radical turn in his life, namely the series of religious visions that moved him to abandon his scientific work altogether. Swedenborg's case is of course rather extreme. But what I want to note here is that his scientific work on the brain in particular was not wholly disconnected from the kind of spiritual knowledge he pursued later in his life. His esoteric claims were not at all a rejection of materialist science in favour of direct mystical contact, but instead a turn from the seeking out of spirit within the context of our concrete embodied lives, to a search for that spirit as it existed beyond all sensible experience.

It is not entirely coincidental that the flourishing of esoteric thought in the Super-Enlightenment was largely a late-eighteenth-century phenomenon. Conjectural speculations on the most elusive qualities of 'order' and 'life' fuelled some rather grandiose thinking about the cosmic order as a whole, even within mainstream enquiry.⁴⁴ In this intellectual matrix, Super-Enlightenment thinking could resurrect older paradigms of cosmic order, but now they were integrated into the epistemological terrain of the Enlightenment. In the intellectual culture of later eighteenth-century Europe, the question of the 'beyond' within the order of the natural world itself opened up the space for a new form of *Naturphilosophie* and, along with it, a refining of the super-epistemological capacities of the human mind. In other words, it was Enlightenment epistemology and natural science that made possible Super-Enlightenment efforts to redefine the cognitive subject as a privileged site for the intersection of cosmic forces of order. Super-Enlightenment enquiry consistently preserved some of the ideals of the scientific disciplines themselves. Esoterics of the Super-Enlightenment were usually very careful to incorporate the discoveries of Enlightenment natural science,

42. Inge Johnsson, *Visionary scientist: the effects of science and philosophy on Swedenborg's cosmology* (West Chester, PA, 1999), ch.3.

43. E. Benz, *Emanuel Swedenborg: visionary savant in the age of reason*, translated by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (West Chester, PA, 2002), p.129-31, 135.

44. A. Faivre, *Access to Western esotericism* (Albany, NY, 1994), p.28, draws too hard a distinction between Enlightenment and esotericism – the one is 'mechanical', the other 'symbolic' and therefore rich in connections.

because these discoveries often increased the plausibility of their more ambitious claims.⁴⁵

One reason why the thought of Saint-Martin, the *philosophe inconnu*, is so important in the late Enlightenment and Revolutionary period is because it reveals with great clarity the intimate link between Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment epistemologies. Saint-Martin explicitly challenged mainstream philosophical thought by honing in on just those cognitive capacities that highlighted the mind's own essential distance from the merely sensible forms of experience produced by the body. The body might 'occasion' knowledge, he said, but it is the non-material soul that is able to 'perceive'.⁴⁶ The materialist philosophers, he claimed, denied that thinking can come from 'beyond', 'ils nient que ses pensées viennent d'ailleurs que de la matière et des sens', and yet, as Saint-Martin himself would repeatedly demonstrate, the most interesting kind of thinking always seems to rely on intuitive, elusive judgements and insights that cannot be reduced to simpler forms of cognition.⁴⁷ As we have seen, this discourse of 'intuition' structured a modern super-epistemology from at least Galileo on. Saint-Martin's theory of intellectual discovery was structurally very similar to these modern theories (and practices) of knowledge, as they developed from the new science through to the late Enlightenment.⁴⁸ Saint-Martin believed that our perception of truth was a kind of miraculous moment: we see foundational truth, he explained, 'par le rapport et la convenance qui se trouvent entre la justesse de ces axiomes, et l'étincelle de vérité qui brille dans notre conception'. These partial truths, what Locke called 'sparks of bright knowledge', would lead us closer to the 'vérité totale' that is divine insight.⁴⁹

Saint-Martin's confrontation with the problem of order within human thought, human history and the natural world roughly paralleled Enlightenment explorations of these topics. More important, his efforts to uncover the relationships that linked these dimensions of existence dovetailed with the more speculative strands of Enlightenment thought, especially in the genre of conjectural history. To be sure, Saint-Martin

45. Faivre, *L'Esotérisme*, p.43-44, 45; Stuckrad, *Western esotericism*, p.99; Ernst Benz, *The Theology of electricity: on the encounter and explanation of theology and science in the 17th and 18th centuries*, translated by Wolfgang Taraba (Alison Park, PA, 1989).

46. See Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Controverse avec Garat: précédée d'autres écrits philosophiques*, ed. Robert Amadou (Paris, 1990), p.344-427.

47. Saint-Martin, *Controverse*, p.246.

48. Saint-Martin, *Controverse*, p.269; L.-C. de Saint-Martin, *Ecce homo* (Paris, Cercle Social, 1792), p.11-12. On analogy as method in Saint-Martin, see Nicole Jacques-Lefèvre, *Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, le 'philosophe inconnu' (1743-1803): un illuministe au siècle des Lumières* (Paris, 2003), p.109.

49. Saint-Martin, *Ecce homo*, p.3, 6.

used the concept of super-epistemology to recuperate an esoteric (and largely Christian) doctrine of sin, to argue, that is, for the need to overcome the distance between our embodied forms of existence and the sources of higher identity that lie far beyond the concrete time and space of actual experience. For Saint-Martin, the cognition that exceeds sensibility is taken as a sign of a higher presence within our soul; it is a ‘thread’ to be followed back to its origin.⁵⁰ As Faivre puts it: ‘Doué d’autonomie, l’esprit peut communiquer directement avec le divin qui, en nous, se manifeste par une lumière intérieure située au-delà de la connaissance rationnelle.’⁵¹ The autonomy of the self, which needs to be understood as a product of scientific modernity, underpins an esoteric rejection of that same modernity.⁵²

In contrast to the kind of thinking exemplified by Saint-Martin and his circle, late-Enlightenment epistemology of the beyond would fold itself back onto nature, in an attempt to understand the rather mysterious relational forces that structured the natural world. Human intuition and creative cognition found counterparts in a nature imbued with its own capacity to change, respond and create. While Super-Enlightenment epistemology pointed to the possibility of a genuine escape from our concrete embodied existence, Enlightenment thinking paved the way for a new way of understanding our natural being. In both cases, however, the mind progressed by tracking the truth that lay beyond the sensible foundations of our experience.

The end of super-epistemology

This mirroring of Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment was perceived most clearly at the time by Kant. In his cryptic but powerful essay on esoteric philosophy and Enlightenment metaphysics – the *Dreams of a spirit-seer* of 1766⁵³ – he demonstrated just how close these different forms of thought were, formally at least, and he did this by pointing to their shared super-epistemological structure. First Kant closely analysed the prevailing ideas about ‘spirit’ in the eighteenth century, concluding that these ideas cannot simply be abstractions from

50. L.-C. de Saint-Martin, *Tableau naturel des rapports qui existent entre Dieu, l’homme, et l’univers*, 2 vols ([Lyon], 1782), vol.1, p.2.

51. Faivre, *L’Esotérisme*, p.33. On Rousseau and Saint-Martin in this context, see Charly Coleman, ‘The value of dispossession: rethinking discourses of selfhood in eighteenth-century France’, *Modern intellectual history* 2 (2005), p.299-326.

52. On this trajectory, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, 1992).

53. Immanuel Kant, *Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics*, in *Theoretical philosophy, 1755-1770*, ed. and translated by David Walford, in collaboration with Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge, 2003), p.303-60.

our empirical experiences of the world, since the concept of spirit radically resists any assimilation into a physically conceptualised natural world.⁵⁴ And yet, looking ahead to his critical philosophy, Kant also demonstrates that this physical conceptualisation cannot be privileged, epistemologically, for our understanding of its structure and operation is also no mere abstraction from actual experience.⁵⁵ Kant draws our attention to the fact that, even if the idea of spirit contradicts our idea of materiality, we learn nothing about the possibility or impossibility of spirit's existence. More disconcerting, our ideas tell us nothing about the existence or non-existence of our physical embodiment itself. Kant's disturbing point is that the world we 'experience', the world that is the object of Enlightenment understanding, is just as incomprehensible as the spirit-world sought by the Super-Enlightenment, which is a world that cannot even be directly experienced.

As Kant repeats throughout the text, 'spirit' ideas and 'material' ideas bump up against one another, but in neither case can we establish or deny the actual existence of spirit and matter through the sheer act of thinking.⁵⁶ Kant acutely isolates, then, the risk and the promise that marks both Enlightenment and Super-Enlightenment thought. Thinking points at one and the same time to a spirit-world 'beyond' materiality (though this world is never present to our senses), and to a 'beyond' within materiality itself, namely, its order, its existence, its purpose. Echoing Hume's stance in the *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, Kant is more than willing to admit here that he cannot help but think of himself as a spiritual creature of some sort, and he is convinced that he sees something purposeful and meaningful when he observes the natural world, notably in the domain of 'life', yet he freely concedes that no knowledge could ever affirm or disprove these intuitive claims about nature and spirit.⁵⁷

Kant's important insight is that the supra-sensible dimension of human thought is itself what determines the possibility of these speculations about what lies 'beyond' experience. The mind, he explained, constructs its vision of the world by integrating the variety of sensible experiences that arrive in thinking. The brain itself, he suggests, is the site for a kind of imaginative focalisation of experience that gives it a unity and a virtual spatiality. Kant's point is that our mind continually constructs an externalised image of its own discrete and disconnected sensory data. These virtual spaces of sensation are produced by the intersections of nerve vibration. Here Kant explicitly refers us back to

54. Kant, *Dreams*, p.308-10.

55. Kant, *Dreams*, p.310-11.

56. Kant, *Dreams*, p.312.

57. Kant, *Dreams*, p.314-15, 338.

Descartes's own physiological speculations, and the suggestion that the body organises information to produce a coherent orderly vision of reality. Purely imaginative stimulation is not considered to be 'real' since the intersections are internal to the brain, Kant tells us. We get our sense of reality from senses not because they are more 'real' than any other experiences, but instead because their geometric point of intersection lies 'outside' the mind itself.⁵⁸

The dreams of the spirit-seers – the foundation of an esoteric epistemology, in other words – are described by Kant as a pathological inversion of these points of intersection. The vectors of purely internal imaginations converge mistakenly outside the body and thus appear 'real' to that mind. Kant characterises esoteric thinking as a variety of mental delusion.⁵⁹ But in this critique of Super-Enlightenment knowledge, Kant has opened up serious questions about Enlightenment epistemology. What can we really know about the natural world, its order, its lawful behaviour, its purpose, when that structure is understood to be a projection of human thinking itself? As Kant warns, we can only secure ourselves from the delusory visions of the spirit-seers by 'establishing the limits of our understanding'. For Kant, the limit of understanding is the tracing out of the beyond within sensible experience. The whole of what we can know is just this: how nature appears to us as 'outside' our experience, that is, we will confine ourselves to the study of the 'various appearances of life in nature, and the laws governing them'. A new metaphysical science will not be based on a super-epistemology, one that assumes an outside that can be known, but will instead investigate simply the cognitive structure of the beyond, given that the outside is literally unthinkable in its own terms.⁶⁰

Returning, after a fashion, to Condillac, who argued that there were two kinds of metaphysics – an improper fantasy of speculation and a patient enquiry adjusted to the limitations of the mind⁶¹ – Kant tells us that metaphysics is nothing more than the science of the limits of human reason. Here we can see the very end of Enlightenment (and Super-Enlightenment), for Kant denies the very possibility of a super-epistemology. Unlike Condillac, Kant reveals that the limit of human reason is not an actual boundary circumscribing the territory that we can search for truth, but instead nothing more than the structural conditions of reason itself. Our understanding, that is, is structured by an appearance of the beyond in our mental space, but Kant shows how that 'beyond' is

58. Kant, *Dreams*, p.330-33.

59. Kant, *Dreams*, p.333-37.

60. Kant, *Dreams*, p.339.

61. E. B. de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, in *Œuvres philosophiques*, vol.1, 'Introduction'.

simply 'given' to the human mind; it offers no possibility of an actual extension of thought beyond itself – whether into nature or into the world of spirit. 'It follows from this that if the fundamental concepts of things as causes, of powers and of actions are not derived from experience, then they are wholly arbitrary, and they admit of neither proof nor refutation.'⁶² So when Kant dismisses the spiritual epistemology of the Super-Enlightenment as a deluded inversion of normal cognition, he simultaneously raises the disturbing possibility that Enlightenment was only ever a self-deluded attempt to penetrate the structure of a natural reality that was only ever a self-generated appearance of order.

62. Kant, *Dreams*, p.356.