

Concerning Spiritual Scientific Research

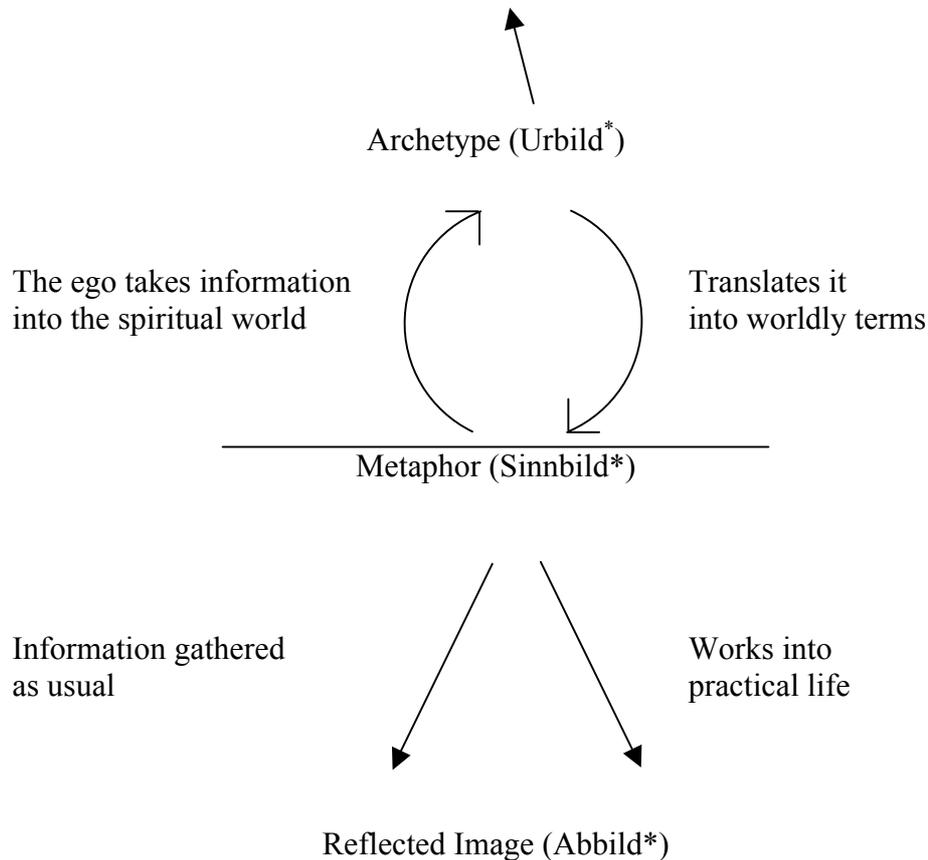
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At the Social Sciences Section meeting at Dornach in November 2000, the late Albrecht Hemming shared an image of the methodology used by the Section Collegium during recent years. Albrecht used the following drawing:

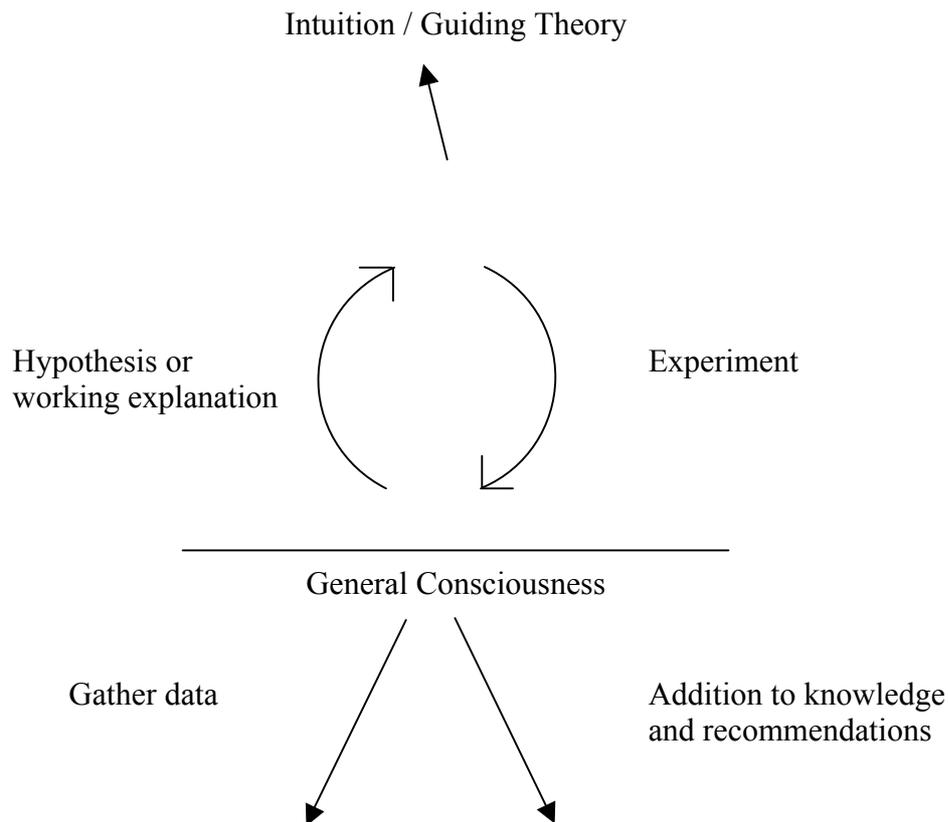


I understood his explanation to be that the spiritual scientist gathers information from the normal world of everyday consciousness (reflected image) and then takes it beyond the threshold (by way of metaphor), where the ego takes it into – or offers it up to – the world of archetypes, whither an ‘answer’ comes, which the ego translates into worldly terms, and then takes back into the normal world, where it works into practical life.

And yet, in normal research methodology what does one do when one gathers data as a social scientist, especially bearing in mind that social data are not sense perceptible? One gathers them from a particular point of view, which is arguably subjective in that the data one gathers will be unavoidably selected from that point of view. Then in order to make one’s research ‘objective’ one subjects it to a process aims to sift fact from opinion. Using a guiding theory, one then fashions a working explanation or hypothesis as a basis for further investigation of the data, in order to make sense of the phenomena they

* After Goethe.

represent. To this end, one then orders that data in accordance with a particular concept (for example, the invisible hand or the threefold nature of society) and then devises a model or an experiment to see if one's explanation is true to life and not just a matter of opinion. The notion here is that if one's explanation is proven to be true beyond one's subjective involvement, then it can be assumed to be true for humanity as a whole and worthy of being added to humanity's knowledge. At that point, it leaves the realm of enquiry and research and enters the general consciousness, often as a recommendation for action. Thus:



Wherein lies the difference between the two approaches, therefore? As the sketches suggest, there may be no formal difference at all, because both seek to apply the scientific method to physically invisible phenomena. Indeed, it may be false to suggest that there is any difference *in method* between spiritual science and the social sciences, as distinct from the physical sciences. To be sure, the social sciences today seek to base their methodology on an approximation of the physical sciences, and yet one cannot be certain today that positivists¹ are any more convinced of the scientific status of today's physical sciences than we are. Indeed, the more scholarly among them recognise their approach to be an approximation.

The spiritual scientist and the modern social scientist both gather information about the phenomena of the world. Both also seek to understand this information at a higher or

¹ Positivism is a philosophical system recognizing only that which can be scientifically verified or which is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and therefore rejecting metaphysics and deism.

more objective level of awareness in order to challenge but not necessarily remove the certainty that attends the initial observation; in order, in other words, to distinguish between passion and perception. Both also consider, or should consider, the perception of phenomena to be uncertain unless verified, and neither accepts, or should accept, that verification proceeds from reading or quoting what others have said, not even Steiner. At the level of research, it is direct experience that matters. Thereby one discovers the verity behind the phenomena. The difference lies in the quality of one's evidence. What evidence is adduced, for example, to prove that the sun will rise every day?

If one does not use a dogma to support one's opinion, what choice does the researcher have but to use a guiding theory, be it the invisible hand or the idea that social reality has a threefold nature, to guide one in one's conceptual organisation of the phenomena one observes? And what can one do with one's explanation other than try it out in the world? There is no proof to be derived from the statement that one's answer came from the spiritual worlds. The proof, as Steiner makes clear, is that one's explanation will not be contradicted by the phenomena. The mark of any science of the invisible is that its truths do not contradict one another. But in how does this differ from the idea in the social sciences generally that contradictory explanations do not amount to sure knowledge, a consideration that they seek to satisfy by analogy to triangulation, often as not forgetting that none of their three points is fixed?² As instruments of research, rival hypotheses are perhaps better thought of as more crude than false, incomplete works-in-progress rather than verities stated.

Is it really helpful, therefore, to suppose that spiritual science is different? Does this not create a misleading and unnecessary divide in the world, diverting attention from the real problems? The difference surely lies not in the methodology but in the *world conceptions* of the researcher – one recognising the spiritual world, the other not. The idea – that spiritual science and social science are different as to *method* – is a dangerous one, liable to result in an explanation of the world that differs more in its words than in social reality, and running the risk that, because we believe ourselves to understand the phenomena better, we do not engage in facilitating this understanding in others, or seeking its equivalent expression elsewhere.

In these terms, the real difference between spiritual science and modern social science generally rests on the fact that because spiritual scientists recognise the spiritual world they come to read phenomena through living pictures, such as the threefold nature of social life, which lead in turn to process-based recommendations which place the human being centre stage, as one able to think, feel and act on behalf of others. In contrast, positivists, disbelieving in the spiritual world, use plausible yet false or caricature imagery, such as the invisible hand, and then resort to mathematics in an attempt to

² Yin is a good and important reference in this regard. See Yin, R. (2009), *Case Study Research. Design and Methods Sage Publications*, Thousand Oaks, 4th ed.

systematise non-physical realities, while, in economics especially, conceiving the human being as ‘noise’ to be eliminated.

The real point concerning spiritual scientific methodology is not the difference between consciousness and unconsciousness, but between the very different realities that one can become conscious of and, indeed, party to.

This whole discussion puts me in mind of the twin pillars of the Hibernia Mysteries and the twin paths of Dionysius the Areopagite, so importantly discussed by Steiner in his Whitsun 1920 lectures on Thomism.³ The point being not to look for a difference between researchers, but to distinguish the paths of reason and revelation *within* the researcher as he or she moves between sense and intuition, perception and conception. Do we not have a modern reflection of this in the characteristic that Steiner points to with regard to economic science, namely that it is both a practical *and* an ethical science and that it is not given to the economist to choose between these two worlds. Or that one only renders economics scientific when, as regards induction and deduction, one either refuses or combines both.

I cannot speak for law or psychology, for example, but inasmuch as this twin experience is certainly true of economics and economic history, it is difficult to resist the feeling that in this whole matter we brush against the sensitive topic of the destiny of Daniel Dunlop. Coming out of the West, out of the Hibernia region, here was a man who was strongly connected to the meeting of esotericism and economic life.

How does one enter that world? There is perhaps an important clue in the thesis of this brief essay, namely, that spiritual scientific and social scientific research are more alike than many anthroposophists suppose.

Specifically, that while one may characterise the differences between Goethe and Newton, for example, it is methodologically wrong to oppose them. The problem is more one of holistic rather than partial explanations of phenomena. In that sense, while Goethean light theory can be said to include Newtonian, the converse is not true.

Thus, we are not called upon to oppose spiritual science to natural science as far as the so-called social sciences are concerned, still less to create a divide and consequently separate universes. The challenge is to amplify or enlarge our perception, so that natural scientific theory is seen to have less explanatory power than spiritual science; not none.

If I were to characterise this approach it would be as follows: Steiner’s image is that one passes from ordinary imagination (with a small i) to Imagination (with a big I), thence Inspiration and Intuition. One could equally say, however, that the challenge for many

³ *The Redemption of Thinking*, Lecture II and the Appendix IV, Hodder and Stoughton 1956. See also ‘From Hibernia to Globalisation – Towards a spiritual scientific understanding of modern economic events’, Anita Grandjean, Christopher Houghton Budd and Marc Desaulles, in *Guarding the Shores – Exploring Hibernia*:
https://www.lulu.com/search?adult_audience_rating=00&page=1&pageSize=10&q=guarding+the+shores

people is to begin with an intuition (small i) and make this comprehensible, real, concrete. If one allows that one can thus pass in *both* directions, does one not in fact begin with inspiration and then learn to grow 'down' into imagination and 'up' into intuition?

(Note: The last five paragraphs were amended and extended in June 2009, otherwise the essay is as originally published with one or two minor changes to improve its sense made in January 2022.)