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Aren't we living in a disenchanted world?

It may be easiest to begin with a common assumption: that being modern means being rational. The modern person has a scientific mindset, a pragmatic attitude, and trusts technology to solve our every problem. “Rationality,” in this common view, is the antithesis of being superstitious, believing in magic and spirits, or relying on quackery and pseudoscience. Rational moderns have left all that behind. Let’s take a closer look at those assumptions.

That modern civilization is a disenchanted one can seem intuitive. If we look at our major institutions, evidence of it is not hard to find. The guiding principles of economic life are efficiency, productivity, and profit. Healthcare and medicine are, for the most part, held to strict scientific standards of evidence. The legal system is built on a presumption of innocence according to which a prosecutor must make rational arguments based on evidence, credible testimony, and sound interpretation of law. In everyday life, we trust our engineers to create better smartphones, safer cars, and more efficient public transportation through advances in technology. Faced with global crises such as climate change, most of us now rely on the evidence of scientists and hope that new technologies can give us cleaner and more efficient sources of energy. In short, rational principles are key to how modern society is structured. There is little room for petitioning the spirits or consulting horoscopes for solving society’s challenges.

There is little doubt that modern society is built primarily on science and technology rather than “magic,” broadly conceived. Nevertheless, something crucial is missing from this description: namely, the *individuals who inhabit* modern societies. Polls consistently show that a significant share of the population (usually around 40-50%) in putatively modern, post-industrial societies such as the United States or the United Kingdom, believe in “supernatural” phenomena such as ghosts and haunted houses, or “occult” powers such as telepathy and clairvoyance.¹ In popular culture, filmmakers, TV scriptwriters, and authors of bestselling fiction cater to a huge audience

¹ See e.g. Asprem, “Psychic Enchantments of the Educated Classes”; Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 22-34.

hungry for storylines with occult themes – so much so that some speak of a “popular occulture” at the heart of modern society.² Books that teach you how to attain success through positive thinking or “the law of attraction,” such as Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret*, become international bestsellers. It seems that the modern attitude to enchantments is one of *fascination* rather than outright rejection. How can we explain this two-sided picture, and what does it *really* tell us about the modern world and its inhabitants?

The idea that modernity is characterized by the disenchantment of the world is associated with the theories of German sociologist and economic historian Max Weber (1864–1920). In a lecture to students at the University of Munich in 1917, as Germany was exhausted by war, Weber proclaimed that disenchantment was “the fate of our times.”³ The understanding that magic, mystery, and sacrality were dissipating from a world increasingly dominated by industry, technology, and expanding bureaucracies was, however, not new: it resonated with deep-seated stereotypes that can be traced back at least to the early Romantic movement, and had found powerful expressions in the works of Novalis, Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Schiller and others. For Weber, however, disenchantment was more than a poetic expression of the *Zeitgeist*. It was a historical phenomenon with specific consequences for how we live our lives.

What did disenchantment mean for Weber? Above all it was a shift in mentality. Reflecting on the impact of science and technology on people’s everyday lives, Weber saw that modern people do not necessarily have more knowledge about their world than inhabitants of simpler societies do of theirs. Precisely *because* of the increasing reliance on rational technology and bureaucratic organizational structures, modern persons usually have *no clue at all* about how the things they rely on every day really work. We can trust our smartphones to show us around a new city without any knowledge of electronics, GPS satellites, or coding, and we can trust money to buy us coffee without knowing the intricacies of global economics. What *is* distinctive, according to Weber, is that moderns expect the world they inhabit to be *in principle* understandable. If one so wishes, one can learn how satellites work, or why money sometimes buys more coffee and sometimes less. This means that, to modern people, there are no “mysterious, incalculable powers” in the world: anything can in principle be

² E.g. Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary.”

³ Weber, “Wissenschaft als Beruf.”

explained rationally. This, Weber held, is the key difference from living in an “enchanted” world, where ancestral spirits protect the tribe from misfortune and capricious gods must be placated through sacrifice.

There are many facets to the process of rationalization that, as Weber saw it, led to the disenchantment of the world. The increasing prominence of technological and scientific solutions in economic life, and rational principles of association in organizations and government were but the latest and most important part in a story that runs much deeper in history. It starts, in fact, as a theological process. With the invention of monotheism in the ancient world came pressures to conceive of divinity in radically transcendent, otherworldly terms – together with a suspicion of any “mysterious, incalculable powers” capable of causing changes in the world in response to incantations, charms, or spells. The anti-magical polemic of Jewish and Christian authorities, along with the broader shift away from temple-based sacrifice to an internal “care of the self” turned the emphasis of religion away from external powers in nature towards individual moral conduct. While it has been common to view this shift as inherent to the “Abrahamic” monotheisms, the end of sacrifice arguably started with philosophy, and especially with Platonism.⁴ However this may be, it intensified in Northern Europe in the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation, which saw an increased scepticism towards rituals and “pagan” survivals on the whole, fuelling renewed sanctions and prosecutions against “magic.”⁵

In this sense, the disenchantment narrative that Weber suggested has close links with the polemical history that led to the formation of esotericism as a category of “rejected knowledge.”⁶ To Weber, however, the explicit attacks on “magic” and paganism were not as important as the change in *conduct* that Protestantism inculcated: what mattered was that people increasingly thought that salvation was something between God and the individual, linked to the following of rules of pious behaviour. The result was an “inner-worldly asceticism,” in which the emphasis is on methodical conduct in everyday life – a shift in mentality that Weber famously connected to the emergence of modern capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

⁴ See e.g. Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*.

⁵ See e.g. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

⁶ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

When we talk about living in a “disenchanted world,” then, we are talking about a *mentality* and a *pattern of behaviour*. What are people’s assumptions about the world, and what actions do they prefer to take when confronted with a problem? The key assumptions of a disenchanted world, as Weber saw it, can be divided into three areas, all having to do with the strict separation between God and the world:

- 1) Humans can in principle *explain and control* the world. This is the task of empirical science and technology.
- 2) Humans cannot know deeper aspects of reality. *Metaphysics* is beyond the empirical, and only an act of (unverifiable) revelation can grant insight into it.
- 3) Humans cannot extract any knowledge about *how to live their lives* from studying nature. Values and morality are provided by religions and philosophies, but since they cannot be validated empirically they are ultimately a matter of individual choice.

This has profound implications for the place of religion in society, but also for the domain of esotericism and magic. The separation of facts from values, as well as the separation of metaphysics from empirical knowledge, means that religions are tolerated to the extent that they do not interfere with the domains of science and technology. Vice versa, science goes bad when it presumes to speak of values and ultimate causes. “Magic” becomes intolerable – along with all religions that stress some form of immanence – because it breaks the neat divide between a rational, explicable world and a wholly transcendent realm of meaning and metaphysics.

The problem for a historian of religion is that this very period – the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – is characterized by a tremendous interest in precisely the sort of ideas that blend religion and science, facts and values. This is the period when spiritualism and modern occultism take shape, and spread rapidly around the globe. It is the time when educated middle- and upper-class people join the Theosophical Society *en masse*, and even scholars and scientists find spiritualist phenomena fascinating and serious enough to investigate with the empirical methods of “psychical research” – the beginnings of the discipline now known as parapsychology. If we follow the disenchantment narrative, we must explain these phenomena as irrational and

illegitimate deviations from the main line of modernity. Indeed, Weber himself dismissed those scientists of his day who found God in nature as “big children,” and saw nothing but “humbug and self-deceit” in the new eclectic spirituality gaining popularity among middle-class people.⁷ Seeing that the big children in question include key contributors to the science and culture of modernity, even several Nobel laureates, this seems unsatisfactory. So what are the alternatives?

One alternative is that disenchantment never happened. This is what Jason Josephson-Storm argues in his book, *The Myth of Disenchantment*. According to him, disenchantment is a myth in two different senses. It is a myth in the colloquial sense that it didn't happen. People still believe in all manner of supernatural, occult, and magical phenomena, even though they may no longer be referring to exactly the same phenomena as before. However, it is also a myth in the sense of a *grand narrative* that modern people, and especially academics and scientists, have built their identity around. The idea that we have gotten rid of magic and superstition is a core element in the stories we tell about who we are, where we came from, and how we are different from the people of the past (the “dark middle ages”) and people in other parts of the world (“primitives”). We sense this grand narrative in triumphalist histories of the Scientific Revolution, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the progressive political movement toward democracy and prosperity.

The myth of disenchantment works as what Josephson-Storm calls a *regulative ideal*. It offers a normative view of what we moderns *ought* to believe and, especially, what is to be expected of a modern scientific discipline. The latter is important because Josephson-Storm sees disenchantment as a foundation myth for the new human sciences that emerged during the nineteenth century. By proclaiming that magic was an anachronistic thing of the past, and that its retired concepts were now becoming *objects of study* for disciplines such as anthropology, folkloristics, sociology, or history of religion, these disciplines reinforced the myth of disenchantment while boosting their own claim to “modern” scientific status. In short, the new human sciences associated a rational disavowal of anything occult with “proper science.” At the same time, as Josephson-Storm painstakingly demonstrates, pioneering scholars developed their

⁷ See discussion in Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 32-39.

public statements from often deep personal fascination with the occult currents of the nineteenth century.

While I agree that disenchantment has functioned as a grand narrative, and hence a foundation myth of modernity, I think it is too simplistic to dismiss it as a myth in the sense of something false.⁸ When Weber suggested that the rationalization of society has consequences for how people think and act, and that these consequences make themselves felt in the realm of religion and spirituality, he was on to something important. The question is what these consequences really were, and more fundamentally, how we should think about them. The statement that rationalisation has rendered the world disenchanted is also too simple an answer.

In my *The Problem of Disenchantment*, I have suggested a different approach. Rather than viewing disenchantment as a *process* that produces disenchanted minds, we should view it as a *problem* faced by modern subjects. The rapid spread of technical education and philosophical attitudes along Kantian lines produced pressures among those receiving formal education to conform to a disenchanted world picture. They were taught that matter is devoid of meaning and the world a giant mechanism, and these views were increasingly experienced in politics and in everyday life through technologisation and the pursuit of pragmatic efficiency. Now, as long as these views are thoroughly internalized and seem plausible to individuals, there is no problem. The trouble is that this world picture violates deep-seated intuitions about agency, values, and causation that, even among the most highly educated, make it tempting to resist and formulate alternative worldviews.⁹ While humanity is a cognitively flexible species, it remains the case that our psychological foundations evolved to survive a very different environment from the one we now inhabit. Viewing living things as machines does not come easy for us; thinking about ourselves and those we love in the same mechanistic terms much less so. In fact, we naturally tend to err on the side of attributing more rather than less life, mind, and agency to phenomena we encounter in the world. This is true even for trained scientists. To the extent that religious attitudes tend to revolve around mysterious agents such as gods, spirits, or ancestors, this means that “religion is natural and science is not.”¹⁰

⁸ See my detailed review of Josephson-Storm’s thesis in Asprem, “Occult Disenchanters.”

⁹ See also Asprem, “Disenchantment of Problems.”

¹⁰ McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not*.

When we look at disenchantment as a problem to which people can respond in various ways rather than as a mentality that is simply taken for granted we can acknowledge both 1) that rationalization did happen and did produce cultural pressures on how people view the world, and 2) that the wide variety of “enchanted” positions that were developed in response are integral to modernity rather than irrational deviations from it. Moreover, since the problem of disenchantment is a predominantly cultural one, we should expect that it is first and foremost those with some education and the luxury to ponder “big questions” that will be bothered by it. For this reason, it is not surprising that the academic world has generated some of the most influential frameworks for new spiritualities in the twentieth century.

In *The Problem of Disenchantment*, I call these frameworks “new natural theologies,” and identify five different schools that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century. The best-known today is probably the field known as “quantum mysticism.” Contemporary spirituality is flush with references to the “mysteries” of quantum mechanics, which are often seen as supporting the idea that mind creates matter, or that the natural world displays counterintuitive properties such as that a particle can be in two places at once. That non-scientists would co-opt what they take to be scientific fact for their own purposes is not surprising; the point here, however, is that these sorts of overblown speculations about the spiritual implications of quantum physics did not start with new age hippies, but with the first generation of quantum physicists. People like Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976), Niels Bohr (1885–1962), and Wolfgang Pauli (1900–1958) all flirted with broad worldview implications of their scientific work, breaking explicitly with the “disenchanted” dictum not to conflate facts with values, or keeping science apart from metaphysics.

Many other enchanted ideas were developed by academics. Vitalism is a recurrent case: The view that life is not reducible to “matter,” but instead propelled by some other, mysterious and largely incalculable force was suggested by turn-of-the-century biologists such as Hans Driesch (who spoke of “entelechy”) and popular philosophers such as Henri Bergson (who popularized the term *élan vital*). Such ideas have proved popular among those who value both science and spirituality. Moreover, the notion of an irreducible life force has frequently been connected to psychic powers and spiritualist phenomena, creating a link between heterodox biology and heterodox religion.

The “psychic enchantments” associated with parapsychology and so-called psychical research have historically been closely linked with vitalism, but also with quantum mysticism. The collaboration between Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and Wolfgang Pauli resulted, among other things, in a perceived link between microphysics and psychic phenomena. Another founding figure of quantum mechanics, Pascual Jordan (1902–1980), connected physics with parapsychology, a vitalistic view of organisms, and an “organicist” right-wing view of politics and society. In recent years, connections between vitalistic biology and psychic phenomena have been spearheaded by Rupert Sheldrake (b. 1942), a Cambridge trained biologist turned best-selling author of spiritual non-fiction.

Sheldrake illustrates another aspect of this field of speculation: while it springs from the sciences, it rarely fails to develop a polemic against what it sees as “dogmatic” and “reductionist” tendencies in the same natural sciences.¹¹ It would thus be easy or even tempting to dismiss this tendency as anti-scientific. Doing so would require us to ignore the fact that the discourse created by these authors is itself a *product of* the modern sciences, articulated by PhDs and working scientists who often, though certainly not always, stay true to what they consider proper scientific values of free inquiry, theoretical speculation, and empirical explorations of elusive phenomena. The alternative is to view the new natural theologians as individuals struggling with the problem of disenchantment, choosing to respond to it by challenging the current scientific world-picture rather than abandoning their deeply seated intuitive understandings of life and nature. In that sense, the new scientific enchantments are integral parts of modernity.

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¹¹ See Sheldrake, *Science Delusion*.

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