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The Disenchantment of Problems: Musings on a Cognitive Turn in Intellectual History

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Abstract

This article responds to Hans Kippenberg's, Willem Drees's, and Ann Taves's commentaries on my book, *The Problem of Disenchantment*. It presents an overview of the key arguments of the book, clarifies its use of *Problemgeschichte* to reconceptualize Weber's notion of disenchantment, and discusses issues in the history and philosophy of science and religion. Finally, it elaborates on the use of recent cognitive theory in intellectual history. In particular, it argues that work in event cognition can help us reframe Weber's interpretive sociology and deepen the principle of methodological individualism. This helps us get a better view of what the 'problems' of *Problemgeschichte* really are, how they emerge, and why some of them may reach broader significance.

Keywords

disenchantment – Max Weber – problem history – religion and science – method and theory in the study of religion – methodological individualism – cognitive science – event cognition

Introduction: From Process to Problem

Writing *The Problem of Disenchantment* has taught me many lessons about the challenges of taking on a subject matter that transcends disciplinary borders. The questions that interested me belonged to an interdisciplinary space situated somewhere between intellectual history, the history and philosophy of science, and the study of religion and esotericism. So I adopted what I came to call the 'endoxic principle': I talked to colleagues in other disciplines, went to

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other conferences, and read widely in literatures beyond my own field. The broad thematic reach of the resulting book, and the number of disciplines invoked in various parts of the argument has, I realize, made it a difficult work to review. Reviewers face the same challenge of interdisciplinarity as the author did, without the allocated research time to go beyond their own field. The comments appearing in this symposium deal with that challenge by focusing on specific topics and themes rather than treating the entirety of the book's argument. This allows for focused, specialist discussions, but it might also leave the reader with a somewhat fragmented view of what the book is about. At the outset of my response, I will therefore take the opportunity to give a glance of the big picture. Luckily, Ann Taves' review (this issue) does a great job at summarizing the different parts of the book, so I will limit myself to some overarching comments on the argument before launching into a response to individual comments.[1]

The purpose of the book can be described in two complementary ways—from a bottom-up, empirical point of view, and a top-down, theoretical one. From the empirical point of view it is a book about scientists, occultists, philosophers, theologians, and other members of a broadly conceived intelligentsia who, at the beginning of the previous century, engaged in activities that blended 'religious' and 'scientific' discursive registers. Examples include the experimental study of reputedly paranormal powers, clairvoyant observations of the chemical elements, vitalistic theories of life and mind, notions of 'etheric bodies', alchemy in the age of radioactivity, and methodological naturalism applied to magical rituals and visionary experiences. The book locates and maps people and institutions that created such blended discourses, and seeks a language that sufficiently grasps their complex positions within the (presumably) modern, scientific, rational, technologized society that many of them helped forge.

On the theoretical description, it is a book about the disenchantment thesis associated with Max Weber, and how best to make use of it as an analytical tool in intellectual history. The theoretical argument is that disenchantment, considered as a historical process of the rationalization of conduct and shifting attitudes to the natural world, tends to miss out on the complex relations

1 Regretfully, there are no scholars of Western esotericism among the reviewers in this issue, which means that about one quarter of the book (part four) is not discussed at all. The overarching arguments concerning disenchantment and problem history can, however, be presented without the empirical support of the esoteric material. What we do not get is the implications of this perspective for the study of Western esotericism, which were explored in the final three chapters of the book and form a crucial part of its conclusion.

between science, religion, magic, and 'the occult' that we see on the ground. This problem has become evident in recent attempts by scholars to figure out whether we are currently witnessing 'disenchantment' or 're-enchantment'—and, more fundamentally, *what counts as evidence* for any of these grand processes of socio-historical change. To avoid these issues (which I argue are largely pseudo-debates), I opt for reconceptualizing disenchantment in a way that lets us take a closer look at the worlds of individuals, and map how they construct those worlds without assuming beforehand (as the disenchantment thesis seems to do) that, in a disenchanted world, 'science' and 'meaning' has (or ought to have) been disjointed.[2]

To do this I looked to the recent literature on *Problemgeschichte* ('problem history') in intellectual history: rather than a process of macro-historical change, tending in a certain direction and carrying implications 'downwards' to social subsystems and individuals, we can see disenchantment as a set of *problems*, faced under certain conditions (e.g., the rationalization processes described by Weber) and by certain individuals (mostly intellectuals, who tend to worry about such things). On this view, we can reconstruct and analyse the multiplicity of voices that we find within and outside of scientific institutions on issues such as the scope of rational knowledge and the possibility of grounding ethics and metaphysics in science in terms of diverging responses to the problem of disenchantment.[3] Incidentally, this move entails a return to the sort of methodological individualism that Weber often prescribed, but did not always follow when constructing his influential theses about historical processes.[4] But it also takes us beyond that position, because we need to drag the

2 I document the philosophically normative connotations of some of Weber's writing on disenchantment in chapter one, Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), 32–40. They are Kantian in origin, primarily mediated through Weber's friend, the neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert.

3 This involved a reconstruction, on my part, of three dimensions of disenchantment—the epistemological (boundaries of knowledge), axiological (relation of facts to values), and metaphysical (relation of empirical knowledge to metaphysics)—along which we can orient multiple debates and discussions happening across different fields in this period.

4 I am far from the first person to point out these inconsistencies in Weber. They have been known since the 1940s. See Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, "Introduction: The Man and His Works," in idem (trans., eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 3–76, see p. 57; cf. Friedrick H. Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber," *The British Journal of Sociology* 31/3 (1980), 316–351. On the emergence of methodological individualism in the Weberian research tradition, see Joseph Schumpeter, "On the Concept of Social Value," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 23

'problems' down from the abstract sphere of ideas and macrohistorical processes, and down into the minds and bodies of the people who experience and respond to them. This means that individuals are not, after all, our atoms: we can split them further to learn about the cognitive and psychological structures that allow people to perceive 'problems' and drive them to explain, resolve, or respond to them in a variety of ways. There is, in short, room for a cognitive turn in intellectual history, on which I wish to offer some further thoughts at the end of this response.

Responses

At their best, book reviews and open peer commentaries are integral to the constructive work that scholars do. Aspiring to this ideal I will use most of this response piece to discuss future directions that emerge from reviewers' comments. However, a constructive debate also requires that we are clear about which assumptions we share and where we diverge. For this reason it is still necessary to engage some of the criticisms that emerged in the commentaries, and to correct some objections that seem to rest on false assumptions.

Weberian misreadings: Response to Hans Kippenberg

I must therefore begin with Kippenberg's text, which, at least in its rhetorical aspect, is the most critical of the lot. Kippenberg offers rich details on Weber's various positions on economy, law, ethics, and magic, before arguing in the very last sentence, that "Asprem's findings do not require a revision of the Weber thesis, but would have benefitted from a better understanding of it and its integration into his own story." (insert pages). This criticism rests on a fundamental misreading of what the book aims to do.

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Kippenberg notes that my core aim was to "reconceptualise Max Weber's notion of disenchantment," (insert pages) and in response, he acts the role of Weber's guardian. This seems a little unnecessary. As stated unambiguously in the first chapter:

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(1908–1909), 213–232. Cf. Jon Elster, "The Case for Methodological Individualism," *Theory and Society* 11/4 (1982), 453–482; Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 48–49.

> I do not seek to 'rectify' Weberian modernization theories, or make a contribution to the largely exegetical field of 'Weber studies'. Instead, my engagement with the concept of disenchantment is aimed at constructing an analytical framework for the study of a complex intellectual field that defies 'easy categorisation in terms of 'science', 'philosophy', or 'esotericism'. My argument is that a problem-historical operationalisation of disenchantment helps us develop new interdisciplinary perspectives on modern Western religious history, grounding key concerns of the history of religion in a broader context of modern intellectual history.[5]

The merits of this approach cannot be judged simply on its relation to 'what the Professor said'. It must be rated on whether such an interdisciplinary perspective has been successfully achieved, and whether it has provided any new insights into the empirical field that it set out to explore. None of these issues are reflected in Kippenberg's response, which does not mention the problem-historical framework at the very core of the reconceptualization I advocate. This is unfortunate, seeing that I argue that *Problemgeschichte* "serves to make disenchantment more consistent with Weber's overall interpretive sociology."[6]

The misreadings become even clearer in the details. For example, Kippenberg has me arguing that "modern science is based on a rejection of an ancient and pagan tradition of cosmotheism" (insert pages). In fact, I say almost the exact opposite—that the secularization of the sciences in the late 19th century allowed some scientists to converge with 'pagan' positions.[7] The confusion stems, perhaps, from a more fundamental assumption, evident in the claim that "Asprem recognizes the natural sciences as the driving force behind the disenchantment of the human attitude to the natural world", and, similarly, that "[t]he force behind disenchantment is a norm that derives from the enlightenment and scientific naturalism" (insert pages). This is the core claim around which Kippenberg builds his response. In fact, however, I argue *with* Weber that the conditions for (the problem of) disenchantment originate in theological processes that are ultimately rooted in antiquity, and that the 'modern sciences' are part of its particular expression in modernity.[8] Disenchantment does not 'derive' from science, but rather presents some epistemological conditions for scientists (the aforementioned 'norms', which Weber discussed in "Wissenschaft als Beruf"). One of the arguments of the book is that the influence of these

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5 Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 19.

6 Ibid., 48

7 Ibid., 285–6.

8 Ibid., 32,40, 542–8.

conditions, even on the hardest of the natural sciences, was much more limited than is typically thought (also by Weber, as I demonstrate).

Finally, the claim that disenchantment "derives from … scientific naturalism" is, again, contrary to what I actually argue. I make an (admittedly ideal-typical) distinction between the assumptions of disenchantment and those of naturalism (chapter two), showing that these in fact differ on important points of epistemology, axiology, and metaphysics.[9] Disenchantment separates the empirical from the transcendent; naturalism makes everything empirical. The philosophical nuance may seem trivial at first, but the consequences for how individual actors negotiated science, religion, and the occult have been far-reaching.

As far as I can see, once these misconceptions are corrected, Kippenberg's erudite discussion only confirms that my problem-historical reworking of disenchantment has deep support in the corpus of Weber's own work.

Problems in the History and Philosophy of Science (and Religion): Response to Wim Drees

Wim Drees' response focuses on issues in the history and philosophy of science. As a key player in the 'religion and science' field, Drees is well placed to do so, and he even raises some questions of a theological nature. I do not presume to be a theologian or a philosopher, although I recognize that my argument may have implications to those who do. In responding to Drees, then, I will allow myself to reflect on some of the wider concerns, begging apology for stepping into speculative territory. I will, however, focus primarily on points of direct historical or analytic importance.

Drees asks three types of questions, one related to the history of science, one to natural theology, and one bearing on the philosophy of religion. The first of these is a counterfactual question, but an intriguing one at that: Why did parapsychology fail, while quantum mechanics (QM) became a successful science? The background for this question is my focus on how both disciplines emerged with support from similar cultural sentiments, clashed spectacularly with established worldviews, and were inhabited (in the crucial period relevant to us here) by serious researchers. It is a theoretically relevant question: What other dimension of these scientific practices must a historian draw on to account for their radically different fates? Drees, in fact, answers the question

9 Ibid., 73–80.

himself, stating that "[t]he real difference … was pragmatic, in empirical and technological success" (add page). QM works, parapsychology does not.

I am sympathetic to this view, although I also think things are a bit more complicated. Two points are crucial here. First, many parapsychological experiments were in fact deemed *successful*—something that contemporary apologists are eager to tell us. Second, experiment cannot be strictly separated from (explanatory) theory. 'Why did parapsychology fail' may, then, not be the right question: it may be more interesting to ask *how* parapsychological experiments succeeded or failed. Judging from my reconstruction of parapsychological research programs (chapters eight and nine) it seems clear to me that a huge part is played by the resistance towards explanatory theory among leading parapsychologists. Because experiments were always exploratory and never unified by a general explanatory framework, parapsychology suffered from an extreme case of underdetermination. Thus a spectacular failure can be warped into a positive result, and a null finding becomes evidence that *psi* must work in a different way. This theoretical elusiveness of the object of study was even more fundamental than the discipline's pragmatic failure—and a grave concern to other scientists and philosophers. It also related directly to the problem of disenchantment: these "laboratories of enchantment" were structured around the paradoxical attempt to create a science of "mysterious, incalculable powers".[10]

Drees' second type of question is more central to my thesis, as it concerns the origin and nature of the natural theologies discussed in chapter five. As a minor point, he questions how appropriate it was to devote several pages to Arthur Eddington in the context of 'quantum mysticism', seeing that Eddington was writing from the perspective of astronomy and cosmology rather than quantum mechanics, and that he was in fact *opposed* to the very project of natural theology. Both these points are fully acknowledged in the book.[11] I would however like to reflect on this some more, in order to highlight a point that may have gone missing. The inclusion of Eddington (as well as his British colleague, James Jeans) has to do with what I consider to be the most important vehicle through which natural-theological discourses developed in this period: popular science.[12] What stance the individual scientist in fact took on the matters they discussed is of lesser importance —the fact *that* they discussed them in the presence of a larger audience has effectively spread the

10 Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 317–373.

11 Ibid., 263–4 for his scope, and ibid., 268–72 for his anti-theological stance.

12 For a recent take on this issue, see Asprem, "How Schrödinger's Cat became a Zombie: On the Epidemiology of Science-Based Representations in Popular and Religious Contexts," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (in press).

topics to new audiences. Eddington is a good illustration of this. He has often been quoted as saying that "religion first became possible for a reasonable scientific man about the year 1927",[13] pointing to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. However, the reception of this quote is generally oblivious to the context in which it was stated: Eddington went on to write that this "tiresome person, the consistently reasonable man,"[14] is the only fool in the world who would need something as arcane as a scientific paper on a measurement problem in micro-physics to convince them that religion might be worthwhile. Despite this obvious parody, Eddington is frequently quoted to support the connection between modern physics and an esoteric worldview.

Drees also asks a more important question: Given my emphasis on the return of 'philosophical paganism', do I think natural theology is inherently heterodox? The answer is no. Drees rightfully questions this association. Throughout most of its history, natural theology has sprung precisely from the desire to harmonize natural knowledge with 'orthodox' revelation (think Aquinas or Paley). I agree with Drees that there is nothing intrinsically heterodox in this endeavour (heterodoxy is, in any case, a *relational* property defined by an orthodoxy with the power to decide what is deviant —thus nothing could ever be intrinsically heterodox). However, I do want to argue two theses: 1) that the secularization of the universities and autonomization of natural science in the 19th century made it *possible* for speculatively-minded scientists to approach a 'pagan' natural theology that conflicted in important respects with received orthodoxy; 2) that some scientific ideas of this particular period made it desirable to think in terms that converged with 'esoteric' notions. Thus, the metaphysics of ether, the psychic enchantments, and the new alchemical paradigms that I discuss in chapter four all seem to erase, in various ways, the distinction between creator and created, and allow for broadly panentheistic conceptions that, sometimes under the direct influence of romanticism and idealism, push for the unity or interpenetration of spirit and matter.[15] My argument is designed simply to show that this tendency *exists* in the period (I argue that it has been undercommunicated in previous research), and to uncover some of the historical reasons why it exists.

13 Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 350.

14 Ibid.

15 It could, however, be interesting to investigate whether the historicization of the cosmos that has occurred in the wake of the Big Bang theory's rise to prominence in the second half of the 20th century has provided better conditions for theists of a more 'orthodox', *creatio ex nihilo* bent.

The final issue that Drees raises really belongs to the philosophy of religion. He is not convinced that a methodological naturalist (as defined for the purposes of this book) must be at odds with 'theism'.[16] This is not surprising, seeing that Drees himself has in the past defended a position in the (theological) science-religion debate, which he labels 'naturalistic theism'.[17] In his comment, Drees suggests that "*agnostic* theism" might be better, and quite consistent with naturalism (insert pages). In one understanding of those terms he may be AQ1
correct: methodological naturalism, being precisely *methodological*, holds merely that claims about anything by definition beyond nature is also beyond the grasp of intelligible discourse. The theist might happily concede that matters of the divine cannot be the subject of *positive* knowledge—*credo quia absurdum*, he will say, before plunging into the depths of faith. The naturalist is therefore mistaken in confusing this leap of faith with a scientific, propositional statement: 'agnostic theism' would be naturalism about everything that is empirical, plus faith in that – of an entirely different order – which might be.

This point is, however, in danger of simply reproducing the lines of the Huxley–Wace debate.[18] Agnosticism, in its Huxleyan variety, is about *weighted inferences*: faith, being an entirely separate sort of propositional attitude (an attitude *despite* inference, so to speak), clashes with this very basic epistemological outlook. Hence, in terms of how these concepts were set up analytically in my book, 'theism' stands outside of 'methodological naturalism' and overtly clashes with the agnostic attitude.[19] Agnostic theism, for me, is a contradiction in terms.

A Cognitive Turn in Intellectual History? Reflections in Response to Ann Taves

Throughout the book, I assume and develop what I call a critical and qualified naturalistic constructionism —a metatheoretical position that endorses

16 Cf. tables and discussion in Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 76–7.

17 Willem B. Drees, *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

18 See Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 291–298.

19 It seems to me that Drees' suggested theism is more akin to 'deism' in the schematic framework that I employ in the book. Following Owen Flanagan, 'theism' is defined here as a position that affirms something outside of the natural order that nevertheless interferes, empirically, in the world through miracles, response to prayer etc., but whose causal activity in the world will, for some profoundly mysterious reason, always elude any empirical enquiry.

discursive analyses of the construction of cultural systems, but grounds them in our best current knowledge of human cognition and biology. Ann Taves picks up on this theoretical dimension and formulates some intriguing suggestions for pushing it further. In this final section of my response, then, I take up the challenge and reflect on some dimensions of the implied cognitive turn in intellectual history.[20]

There are two interrelated points to Taves' response, both building on elements that are most clearly stated in the book's conclusion. One concerns an update of Weber's interpretive sociology in light of current cognitive science; the other concerns the cognitive, embodied, and experiential nature of 'problems' in *Problemgeschichte*.

In discussing these two points, Taves mentions the concept of an 'event'. Over the past year, Taves and I have collaborated on integrating a body of research on event cognition into the study of religion.[21] This literature is focused on how humans recognize, parse, and explain events. We argue that it can help us bring together a large number of concerns, from ritual action and religious experience to the appraisals of accidents and natural events.

Actions—understood as behaviours with subjective meaning—are a type of event. We can therefore situate Weber's interpretive sociology (focused on 'action' in precisely this sense) in relation to event cognition by placing his action types within a broader typology of event processing.[22] We distinguish between four major event types, based on whether a subject perceives them to be *external* (happening in the environment) or *internal* (perceived within oneself) on the one hand, and *intended* or *unintended* on the other (Table 1).

The kinds of actions that Weber has in mind are 'intended external events'—what we call *public* actions. To this we would add *private* actions, which happen when people experience their own mental content as intentionally caused by themselves. The crucial point, however, is that whether or not an event is

20 I now see this as part of the wider 'cognitive historiography' that is currently taking shape. My approach is, for example, remarkably compatible with the programmatic points raised in Jesper Sørensen, "Past Minds: Present Historiography and Cognitive Science," in Luther H. Martin and Jesper Sørensen (eds.), *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2011), which only recently came to my attention.

21 See Ann Taves and Egil Asprem, "Experience as Event: Event Cognition and the Study of (Religious) Experience," *Religion, Brain, and Behavior* (in press). Cf. Radvansky and Jeffrey Zacks, *Event Cognition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

22 I am thinking especially of the methodological precepts developed in the opening pages of Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (eds.), E. Fischoff et al. (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

TABLE 1 *Event types*

	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
INTENDED	Public actions (agents doing things for reasons)	Private actions (reasoning, imagining)
UNINTENDED	Public events (e.g., "natural events")	Private events (e.g., dreaming, hearing voices, seeing things that aren't there)

perceived as intended/unintended or internal/external is the product of cognitive appraisal processes that occur on multiple levels—from basic appraisals of sensory signals and emotions to classification in terms of culture-based schemata. These appraisals take place both in real-time, *as* we experience or do something, and post-hoc, when we reflect on something that happened in the past. Thus, people can shift their post hoc interpretation of whether a particular behaviour was intended or unintended—and thus whether it was an action or an accident. In fact, there is a whole branch of psychological research studying the conditions under which people prefer to explain an event with reference to intentional or non-intentional factors ('attribution biases'). The 'self-serving bias' is probably the best-known effect of this kind: people tend to attribute their successes to intended behaviour, and explain away their failures as caused by external circumstance.[23]

This perspective complicates Weber's interpretation of action, because we cannot take 'subjectively meaningful behaviour' as a simple and stable demarcation of 'action'. Instead we must ask when, why, and how people attribute subjective meaning to *events in general*—and not only to their own behaviour. For example, when someone infers intentions to explain a natural disaster ("the gods are punishing us", "the CIA is testing their geo-weapons"), or interprets the content of a dream as a communication from an external agent ("an angel visited me"), these postulated relationships are part of that person's social world and fall within the scope of a cognitively enhanced interpretive sociology. Since appraisals go all the way down to real-time processing of events, we should, moreover, not limit ourselves to events that are explicitly

23 E.g. James R. Larson Jr., "Evidence for a Self-Serving Bias in the Attribution of Causality," *Journal of Personality* 45/4 (1977): 430–441.

appraised as agentive after the fact. The academic who spontaneously shouts and swears at his computer when it crashes is initiating a social interaction that appraises the computer's behaviour in intentional ways—even if he denies "really believing" that the computer is an agent after the fact. Since we are interested in when and why people explain events with reference to agentive reasons, all the behaviours that are *not* reflectively considered intentional and even break with stated intentions—the sort of behaviours that Weber dismissed as "affects and errors"[24] — form an important part of the social scientist's data set. We are not concerned anymore with reconstructing subjectively rational behaviour, but—in a still remarkably Weberian way—with the *conditions* for conceiving behaviour (and other events) as rational, intentional, and meaningful.

All of this adds considerable depth to the principle of methodological individualism. Since methodological individualism is at the heart of the problem-historical approach that I advocate in the book, this deepening also allows us to consider the cognitive dimension of that approach.[25] So let me try to answer Taves' questions directly: What are the 'problems' of problem history? Where do they come from, and how do people recognize them? What are the origins of the problem of disenchantment in particular?

The new *Problemgeschichte* conceives of problems as situated, embodied, and contextual.[26] They are derived not from timeless 'ideas', but from *experience* in the broadest sense: experience of "human perceptions (inner and outer), of culture, of life, … of world, of society, of history."[27] In the book, I focus mostly on the intellectual and deeply historical reasons for why a specific field of speculation and practice has come to be seen as 'problematic'. In doing so I build on a fairly traditional style of intellectual history. However, I agree with Taves that taking the embodied and experiential nature of perceiving problems seriously means we ought to investigate them

> at a whole range of levels from our perception of the historical past, our personal past, and what just happened. These events have to be perceived

24 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 6.

25 See especially Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 556–60.

26 As contrasted with the largely Platonic *Problemgeschichte* common among some historians of philosophy a century ago (e.g. Wilhelm Windelband and Nicolai Hartmann), who were concerned with the eternal, timeless problems underlying philosophy.

27 Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 29; quote from Marco Sgarbi, "Concepts vs. Ideas vs. Problems: Historiographical Strategies in Writing History of Philosophy," in Riccardo Pozzo and Marco Sgarbi (eds.), *Begriffs-, Ideen-, und Problemgeschichte im 21. Jahrhundert* (Wiesebaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 69–80, 76.

> and appraised in a quite literal fashion in light of various culturally informed criteria by means of naturally grounded processes of event perception and appraisal. (insert page) AQ1

Problems are located on multiple levels—from highly specialized cultural levels, to basic cognition and embodied experience. Some problems are entirely the product of specialized cultural systems, likely to bother only a small group of people familiar with them—and only when they are consciously reflecting on the issues. Many theological, philosophical, and scientific problems are of this kind: the mystery of the Trinity is, *prima facie*, of little concern to the man in the street; the same can be said for squaring the circle, or harmonizing general relativity with quantum mechanics.

Some intellectual problems, however, are spread much more widely. I would hypothesize that problems which become truly influential and widespread in a society build directly on top of basic experience, and are perceived as relevant in everyday interactions in the world.[28] In the book I drew on Robert McCauley's work on the cognitive underpinnings of (popular) religious and scientific practices to make this very point. In McCauley's understanding, 'popular religion' (by which he means something akin to 'lived religion'; that is, what people *actually do* as opposed to what their developed theologies say they *ought* to be doing) recruits evolved inferential faculties involved with intuitive psychology, which enables us to understand phenomena in terms of agent explanations—that is, *to appraise events as actions*.[29] Generally, this leads religions to find lots of agents and explain natural events as actions. Meanwhile, the tendency of the natural sciences (by which McCauley really means the institutionalized, professional activity of the scientific community) since the scientific revolution has been to gradually dispense with agent explanations, first from the field of physics, then from biology, and increasingly also from psychology and other human sciences. Thus, religion tends to find actions everywhere, while science finds them nowhere.

I disagree with McCauley in connecting these diverging explanatory paths with 'religion' and 'science' respectively.[30] However, I think it makes a lot of sense to recast the cognitive dimension of *disenchantment* in these terms. The

28 I am assuming a whole dimension of relevance theory here, which there is no space to go into at present. Cf. Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986).

29 Robert McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

30 See my argument in Asprem, "How Schrödinger's Cat became a Zombie".

disappearance of "mysterious incalculable powers" from the assumed workings of the world and the ascent of an attitude of mastery through calculation entails precisely the extension of intuitive physics to all nature, at the expense of intuitive psychology. But the cultural impulse for doing so has, historically, been as much theological as it has been scientific or philosophical—as the consecutive and recurrent polemics against idols, pagans, and magicians attest to.

The problem of disenchantment, then, belongs to the *consequences* of this cultural shift toward prioritizing causal explanations and calculation. Let me put this in terms of event cognition: The culture provides expectations of how events are supposed to unfold in the form of 'event schemata'. People draw on these schemata when they appraise the inputs from the world around them, parse experience into discrete events and subevents, and explain and classify what is going on. However, schemata supplied by culture is not everything we use to interpret the world—if they were, we would be prisoners of culture, always experiencing exactly what we have been taught. Humans also draw on evolved inferential modules, which guide us toward agent or cause explanations relative to specific sensory cues that we identify in our environments or within ourselves. Most of the time, event schemata will be built on top of these intuitive forms of processing—a schematic representation of a poker game, for instance, builds heavily on mind-reading capabilities and attributions of intention. But on some occasions, there are profound conflicts between schemata and intuitions, and these conflicts can create particularly salient events—*problems*. When we do not succeed in explaining an event with reference to schemata that ought to do the job—or stated more generally, *when appraisals fail*—this tends to give rise to intense post hoc reflections. What happened? How could it have happened that way? *What does it all mean*?

This framework, then, helps us explain how people with a certain intellectual upbringing, skilled at perceiving the world in a certain way, can come to perceive the problem of disenchantment. The crucial observation to make here is that culture-based schemata explaining events in terms of cause and effect rather than intentions and actions *constantly fail* in everyday interactions with the world (exercise: try consistently explaining your spouse or friend as the purely material system that our best current biology holds him/her to be; then apply the same explanation to yourself). It has thus been easy for anti-disenchantment spokespersons to point to lived experience and call upon 'spontaneity' and 'intuition' — a strategy illustrated so perfectly by the German anti-modern *Lebensphilosophie* movement between the wars, or the counter-culturalists and new agers of the post-war era. That some of these educated

dissenters would take the struggle back to the scientific sphere also makes perfect sense: what the emergentists, vitalists, quantum mystics, and parapsychologists have been attempting to do is *rewriting the science-based schemata* to allow for more intention and action in the scheme of nature. To do this, they have had to perceive, identify, and confront the problem of disenchantment not only in their daily lives, but in the realm of scientific theory and experimentation as well.

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I see *The Problem of Disenchantment* as an interdisciplinary, but still fairly traditional work of intellectual history. However, I also hope that it points towards a way of doing the social and intellectual history of religion, science, and esotericism that takes seriously the demands put on people's ability to think, act, feel, and express themselves not only by their cultures, but also by their bodies and their brains.

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