



Disenchantment, Actually

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If you remember anything from high school science, you may remember something of Marie Curie. She was a pioneer in chemistry and physics, and the only person ever to be awarded Nobel Prizes in both. Her research on radioactivity led her to the discovery of polonium and radium, and helped make possible technologies used in cancer treatment, nuclear energy, and nuclear weapons. But while readers may know this synopsis of her life, much less familiar is her abiding fascination with the paranormal—or that in 1907 this paragon of scientific rationality attended a séance with Eusapia Palladino, a psychic rumored to make objects move with her mind.

In *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, Williams College religion professor Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm opens with this anecdote, noting that it doesn't quite jibe with "the single most familiar story in the his-

tory of science," one we tell ourselves in the modern, secular world: the story of disenchantment. Josephson-Storm summarizes it as follows:

The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences
By Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm
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...at a particular moment the darkness of superstition, myth, or religion began to give way to modern light, exchanging traditional unreason for technology and rationality. When told in a soaring tone, this is a tale of triumph; and when recounted in a different and descending emotional register, it can sound like the inauguration of our tragic alienation from an idealized past.

Whichever your take, the narrative abides: Modernity, thus understood, is an age of rationalism, science, and technology that eventually (and inevitably) overcame the mysterious wonders of magic, religion, and superstition. But this story, Josephson-Storm argues, is a myth. Why else, he suggests, would an esteemed scientist

like Curie be cavorting with the likes of Palladino?

Part of his evidence comes from recent polls, which show that belief in psychic healing, ghosts, telepathy, witches, reincarnation, and other paranormal phenomena remains remarkably high. According to 2005 Gallup research, seventy-six percent of Americans “profess at least one paranormal belief.” Results from the large Baylor Religion Survey of the same year show that about 80 percent of respondents believe that angels probably or absolutely exist, and about 66 percent in the case of demons.

While these numbers challenge the idea that ours is a disenchanted age, perhaps such beliefs might still be expected among the common folk. Thus Josephson-Storm places in the crosshairs members of the scientific establishment, who we would expect to be right-thinking. He provides an impressive compendium of Curie-like anecdotes going back to Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, dabblers in magical thinking all, suggesting that our default image of the scientist as hardnosed materialist is more caricature than reality.

From these anecdotes, Josephson-Storm concludes that “we have never been disenchanted.” Thus “we should be less surprised than we usually are to find scientists of all stripes keeping company with magicians.” “Séance and science” have often gone hand in hand, and “it is unclear...

that science necessarily deanimates nature.”

The book, however, is less important as a history of science and magic than as a history of how we came to believe the myth of disenchantment. As he traces the story, Josephson-Storm brilliantly pulls open the curtain on one of our oft-told and rarely questioned modern myths, helping us better to see the motley crew responsible for its production.

But if disenchantment is a myth, just how has it managed to persist for so long? While Josephson-Storm does a fine job exploring the origins and story of the disenchantment myth, his failure to offer an adequate answer to this question leaves much to be desired in his project. The reason for this failure seems to be his restricted understanding of myth as a merely fabricated story or a fiction, and of disenchantment as something we should be able to detect easily from people’s behaviors or self-professed beliefs.

In Josephson-Storm’s account, the myth of disenchantment originated with the German Romantics and was crystallized through Friedrich Schiller’s influential poem “The Gods of Greece.” First published in 1788, the poem became a key expression of a nostalgic longing for a time when primordial man was in harmonious union with the natural world and the gods who animated it. The Romantics bemoaned their age

when man felt himself no longer a part of nature but now a thing apart from it, no longer a semi-divine participant in material life's drama but a detached observer of it. Schiller:

... Ah! how diff'rent was it in that day!

When the people still thy temples crown'd,

Venus Amathusia!

When the magic veil of Poesy
Still round Truth entwin'd its lov-
ing chain—

Through creation pour'd Life's ful-
ness free,

Things then felt, which ne'er can
feel again.

Then to press her 'gainst the
breast of Love,

They on Nature nobler power
bestow'd,—

All, to eyes enlighten'd from above,
Of a God the traces show'd...

Beauteous World, where art thou
gone? O, thou,

Nature's blooming youth, return
once more!

Ah, but in Song's fairy region now
Lives thy fabled trace so dear of
yore!

Cold and perish'd, sorrow now the
plains,

Not one Godhead greets my long-
ing sight;

Ah, the Shadow only now remains
Of yon living Image bright!

Josephson-Storm explains that in its own time and place Schiller's poem, like the later German Romantic

writings it anticipated, was a reaction against a narrow, parochial moment, "a literal secularization" as "German states appropriated property previously belonging to the Church." "Many Catholic universities were suspended, thousands of monasteries were disbanded, and the ecclesiastical territories previously governed by bishops were given over to secular states." It is no wonder the gods are thought to have been eclipsed, Josephson-Storm implies, when secularism turns violent in neighboring France and the Holy Roman Empire (including Germany) collapses soon thereafter.

But those most influenced by the poem—the thinkers who were crucial in perpetuating the disenchantment myth—removed it from this context and treated the story of God's disappearance as a larger historical development. Hegel, Max Weber, the Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer, Freud, the German philosopher and psychologist Ludwig Klages, and other lesser-known figures all not only referenced Schiller's poem but largely assumed the broader architectonic patterns of history as laid out by the German Romantics. This pattern assumed a linear movement of disenchantment, with increased alienation of humans from both the gods and the natural world, culminating in industrialized technologies and revolutionary political orders. Indeed, through their acceptance and

dissemination of this narrative, these thinkers began the important work of encoding the myth, adding texture and detail to a world picture that arguably still captivates the imagination today.

The remainder of the book moves on to deal with the myth's perpetuation. This is where things start to get a bit fuzzy.

As story after story reveals, many of the post-Romantic scientists and peddlers of the disenchantment narrative cultivated a deep and ongoing fascination with magic, the occult, and the paranormal, not to mention religious beliefs of all sorts. None of this, Josephson-Storm continually reminds us, fits the perception that "people no longer believe in magic and spirits." And while the book admirably achieves its aim to "push back against this narrative," one niggling question persists: Why then does disenchantment continue to find traction today?

In hopes of an answer to this question, I approached one of the final chapters, on the Vienna Circle of logical positivists, with bated breath. Surely, I thought, these early twentieth-century thinkers are the true culprits; these are the actual disenchanters who bastardized science into *scientism* and fixed their ideas in the popular imagination, giving this myth its teeth. Let's lay the blame at the feet of the positivists and finally put a bow on this project.

But these hopes are frustrated. Now, Josephson-Storm does concede that the logical positivists attempted "to refashion philosophy in scientific terms." Theirs was "essentially a secularization project," aiming to do away with notions of God and the supernatural. Indeed, the positivists' aim was broader even than this: They sought "the elimination of metaphysics," the aspect of philosophy—the *cogito* of Descartes, the "thing-in-itself" of Kant, the idea of "nothing" in Heidegger—that they thought had become entirely unhinged from human experience and the possibility of empirical or logical verification. To sum up, according to Josephson-Storm, the positivists were anti-religion, anti-magic, and anti-philosophy in the established sense, opposed to anything that evaded rigorous scientific thinking. As their forefather Auguste Comte, the original positivist of the nineteenth century, articulated it, theology always gives way to metaphysical philosophy, which in turn gives way to science. So, we might think, if we want to find a reason for why the myth of disenchantment has survived to our time, we should need to look no further.

But then Josephson-Storm leans back on his prior strategy. Through numerous examples of how the Vienna Circle thinkers were "profoundly entranced by the paranormal" and "haunted by magic and the ghosts of the very metaphysics

they were working to exclude,” he doubles down: Not even they were disenchanted. He goes into painstaking detail to trace how the members of the Vienna Circle were, much like Marie Curie, enchanted by mesmerism, telepathy, and other paranormal activities.

So the question about disenchantment’s persistence as an idea never receives an adequate answer. After several hundred pages, the point of all these anecdotes is just to show, repeatedly, that disenchantment is only a myth, only a fabricated story.

Perhaps Josephson-Storm never adequately addresses this question because he never fully appreciates the powerful ways in which myths operate, even untrue or questionable ones. That magic, religion, and superstition have all persisted up to the modern day does not quite demonstrate his claim that “we have never been disenchanted”—or, put another way, that “modernity signals a societal fissure” between religion and reason “that never occurred.” In his keenness to show that the idea of disenchantment is undermined by the persistence of both sides of the binary, he fails to examine a more interesting and arguably much more important line of inquiry: how this myth has altered the *conditions* in which both religion and science are now practiced. When we consider this, we see that despite the continued prevalence of enchanting beliefs

and practices, we are indeed disenchanted in a more fundamental and pervasive way than Josephson-Storm recognizes.

Just recall his origin story for a moment and his blind spot becomes apparent. He deems pre-Revolutionary Europe to be merely a “historical moment” the Romantics were reacting against in their writings. In doing so “they were making grand themes out of the specifics of their local history.” But this reading fails to take seriously the broader cultural conditions in which such a political and philosophical climate even became possible. Might it have something to do with a broader notion of disenchantment, or “dis-God-ing” (to translate from Schiller’s “entgötterte Natur”), that transcended this particular place and time? If so, the German Romantics may have had real reason for concern, as may have the thinkers who built on their insights. Perhaps their understanding of history’s pattern as a linear alienation from God and nature was questionable, but the idea of a dis-godded condition becoming solidified in a theory of progress and in revolutionary politics, and of it manifesting in physical form in the new industrial world, was so terrifying to them precisely because they knew these things were greater than their particular historical moment.

The only way for the book’s argument to work, then, is to accept at face value the idea of disenchantment

as the simple absence of religion and magic. But we are actually disenchanted in a much more profound way. Yes, religion and magic remain ubiquitous; but they are now performed against a backdrop in which disenchantment is regarded, in ways conscious and unconscious, as true. Disenchantment is the default position in the social imaginary, encoded in our language and in all manner of habits and practices that carry as if we inhabit a mechanistic world. It has become one of the myths we live by, even as we resist it.

The story of Marie Curie that opened the book actually bears this point out. That she was there at all takes so much of Josephson-Storm's attention that he fails to look at *how* she was there: She attended the séance not as a believer but as a physicist investigating the supposed defiance of physical laws.

In *The Myths We Live By* (2004), the philosopher Mary Midgely helpfully expands the definition of myth in ways that would have benefited Josephson-Storm's argument:

Myths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning. For instance, machine imagery, which began to pervade our thought in the seventeenth century, is still potent today. We still often tend to see ourselves,

and the living things around us, as pieces of clockwork: items of a kind that we ourselves could make, and might decide to remake if it suits us better.

The power of myths is that they condition our experience, shaping how we perceive the world and our place in it. To say that we are all disenchanted now means not that we have rid ourselves of the metaphysical or supernatural but that we relate to these as a fallen rather than a reigning order. Disenchantment is the water in which we swim.

This is the main thrust of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007). While Josephson-Storm briefly mentions Taylor early in the book, he misses this key point. Yes, Taylor traces the long and winding story of disenchantment over five centuries and, as such, might be seen as just another perpetuator of the false narrative of the decline of religion and magic in the West. But Taylor's point is hardly that the secular, disenchanted age has done away with these things. Rather, it is that occult practice and belief in God now occur within a culture that takes disenchantment as a basic assumption. He is less interested in what is believed than in what is believable, and even as many still do believe in the supernatural of all kinds, it seems decidedly less believable than it once did.

To say that we live in an urbanized and technological age doesn't

preclude the existence of the Amish; to argue that U.S. culture dominates much of Western culture doesn't preclude the existence of a distinctive Canadian culture; and to maintain that ghosts and spiritual forces have been excised from the world is not to preclude that there are still some—even many—who continue to believe in them. But the ways in which one is Amish, or Canadian, or a believer are affected by the larger, dominant conditions in which one must be any of these. The Amish near the University of Waterloo, Ontario, for instance, have unique side-roads and demarcated lanes upon which to ride their carriages through urban sprawl, and must continually negotiate how changing technologies must be adapted or rejected for their community. Canadian classics like *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* or *Little Mosque on the Prairie* may market themselves as purely Canadian products, but they appeal to Canadian audiences whose appetites are cultivated by U.S. entertainment. This is not to suggest that reigning myths, or paradigms, are not met with resistance. They almost always are. Rather, in the very act of resistance the true power of the myth becomes apparent. They have set the parameters, altered the very conditions for how others operate.

Just what signs are there that disenchantment is pervasively encoded into the very structures of Western life? Consider that much of modern

technology assumes or encourages a disenchanted view of nature. The development of the microscope, for instance, allowed us to see particles that had existed previously only in theory. This makes easier the belief that what is really real are these small parts of the deceptive whole our naked eyes grasps. Of course, philosophy can push against this, but the dominant sense in the modern world is that physical reality is best understood by describing it in terms of its smallest particles. The seemingly neutral microscope, then, can help nudge culture toward the experience of nature as disenchanted, and God or the gods can come to be perceived as less real. Even if the microscope or the science it enables don't necessarily disenchant, science is unequipped to answer metaphysical questions, and so without sound philosophy a godless nature is often what's inferred.

Or take neurochemical or computational explanations for how the brain works, which often serve to suggest that they will one day be able to explain the entirety of our mental lives. This is a philosophical leap, ignoring among other things that the modern scientific project became successful at explaining nature largely because it excluded as a matter of principle those aspects it could not systematically investigate (like mind and final causes). Yet while the mysteriousness of the mind should at least keep the God option on

the table, our reductive language often precludes this possibility in ways that would have been foreign to many thinkers several centuries ago.

Or consider factory farms, where much of our processed meat is “raised,” to be delivered to our grocery stores in neatly plastic-wrapped packs. There is precious little meditation on the sanctity and mystery of animal life going on in such places, or in the minds of consumers who rely on them. Arguably, such places have been created and continue to exist on the premise of a disenchanted world in which animals are mere automata.

While these are negative examples, we should remember too that disenchantment is hardly all negative, as it has helped to make possible a host of inarguable goods of scientific discovery, such as modern anatomy and X-rays. It’s difficult to imagine, at any rate, that modern science would have developed the way it did if materialist doctrines hadn’t been adopted by many scientists. Whether

positive or negative, however, disenchantment has become an integral aspect of the modern view of the world and exerts tremendous pressure on our language, thoughts, and habits, even as many continue to try to push against it.

Myths are at their most potent when they are least visible. Despite the rather limited view of myth on offer in this otherwise remarkable book, Josephson-Storm’s real gift is in making visible that a deanimated material world is not simply “the way things are,” but an accomplishment of shared human understanding. As such, the myth, in the deeper sense of the word, is real and powerful, yet also subject to critique—and perhaps, like what came before it, to replacement.

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