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## CORRESPONDENCE

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### Why Do We Think We Are Disenchanted?

I'm delighted at the amount of attention my latest book—*The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago, 2017)—has received from this journal, with both online commentary by Alan Jacobs (“On the myth of disenchantment” and “More on disenchantment,” Text Patterns blog, May 2018) and a print review by Doug Sikkema (“Disenchantment, Actually,” Winter 2018). Their remarks showcase real insights and I've found them very illuminating. I appreciate the discernment of a distinguished scholar of Alan Jacobs's caliber and I've been having a wonderful email correspondence with Doug Sikkema, who has been very generous and thoughtful about our shared interests.

All that said, I think they also both get my argument wrong in interesting ways that I'd like to address. I want to both set the record straight and address a couple of fundamental issues that have been brought up thus far.

To catch up those who are unfamiliar with my book, *The Myth of Disenchantment* is rooted in the following observation: Many theorists have argued that what makes the modern world “modern” is that people no longer believe in spirits, myth, or magic—in this sense we are “disenchanted.” However, every day new proof arises that “modern” thinkers do in fact believe in magic and in spirits, and they have done so throughout history. According to a range of anthropological

and sociological evidence, which I discuss in the book, the majority of people living in Europe and North America believe (to varying degrees) in the following: spirits, witches, psychical powers, magic, astrology, and demons. Scholars have known this was true of much of the rest of the globe, but have overlooked its continued presence in the West.

So my book set out to answer the question: Where did this notion of de-spiritualized modernity come from? In other words, how did this mistaken belief set in? To explain, I traced the history of the idea that modernity means disenchantment in the birth of various intellectual disciplines, namely: philosophy, anthropology, sociology, folklore, psychoanalysis, and religious studies. In so doing, I discovered that the majority of theorists who gave the idea of disenchantment its canonical formulations were living in Britain, France, or Germany in a period in which *spiritualism* (séances and table turning), *theosophy*, and *magical societies* like the Golden Dawn were taking place as massive cross-cultural movements and, as I show from archival research into these theorists' diaries, letters, and so on, these occult movements entered directly into the lives and beliefs of the very theorists of disenchantment themselves.

As I see it, there are two broad issues at stake in my disagreement with Jacobs and Sikkema. First is *the meaning of disenchantment*; second is *the relationship between science and enchantment*.

Jacobs had a number of positive and insightful things to say about the book.

But as I understand it he had two main criticisms. First, he found my broader notion of the dialectical tension between enchantment and disenchantment not fully convincing and he suggested, for example, that the séances performed by Marie Curie and her husband Pierre (which I discuss in the book) were not enchanted because they were carried out in a laboratory environment, even if Marie did come to believe in the reality of the powers of a spiritualist medium. Second, Jacobs argued that that Charles Taylor's notion of a "secular age"—as the title of Taylor's 2007 book calls it—largely survives my criticism.

I think my main disagreement with Jacobs on the first point is that when we are talking about "disenchantment," he and I are referring to two different things.

As I note in the book, the term "disenchantment" has a plurality of possible meanings. I survey many of these theories in the book and locate them in their respective disciplines. A key insight is that many of these theories bundle some combination of a sociological or historical account together with some kind of melancholy or negative emotional affect.

In particular, while tracing many different characterizations of modernity, I focus especially on the theorists who defined modernity in terms of the loss of myth, popular belief in spirits, or magic. It is these accounts that I am centrally interested in referring to as the "myth of disenchantment," and it is this definition of "disenchantment" I am talking about through most of the book. I am not denying historical change (the world today does indeed look different than it did in previous historical periods), nor am I trying to suggest that our current moment is perfect. There are many reasons we might want to describe the negative effects of

certain technologies or a number of other harmful elements of our contemporary world. Still, my point is that "modernity" as it has long been defined—as a world that is "disenchanted" (devoid of belief in spirits, myth, and magic)—does not accurately describe the world we live in.

Moreover, while I discuss secularization theory early in the book, there is good reason to separate secularization from disenchantment in this sense. I say this because a mass of sociological evidence I survey in the book suggests that de-Christianization, while usually equated with secularization, often correlates with an *increase* in belief in spirits, ghosts, and magic, not the reverse.

In this regard, I've often been asked how my work relates to that of Taylor, the influential Canadian philosopher. As Jacobs helpfully notes in his post, Taylor had many different things in mind when he described the construction of the current age. Jacobs helpfully summarizes these as:

- (a) spirits do not populate the world and therefore cannot be directed and need not be propitiated; (b) magic is impossible; (c) God exists but is not directly involved with the world He made, which runs along on its own power; and (d) God expects everyone to meet His moral standards. In such an environment, which is not created all at once but over a period of centuries, human beings are no longer "porous" but rather "buffered" selves.

In addition to the above, I would also emphasize that Taylor centrally condemns what he calls "disenchantment." Indeed, I would argue that "disenchantment" has long been central to Taylor's project, dating back to his first book about Hegel, where he explicitly turns to Weber's disenchantment to explain what he sees as the core of Hegel's project to overcome the

rupture between man and nature. Thus, disenchantment is a theme Taylor returned to again and again. For instance, much more recently, Taylor argued: “Almost everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of five hundred years ago is that they lived in an ‘enchanted’ world, and we do not,” and in *A Secular Age* he clarifies: “Let me start with the enchanted world, the world of spirits, demons, moral forces which our predecessors acknowledged. The process of disenchantment is the disappearance of this world.”

Jacobs has claimed that Taylor’s argument largely survives my critique. But I’m not so sure.

Taylor gets an important aspect of his argument directly from Schiller/Weber: the idea of the loss of the “enchanted world.” But as I show in my book, over the course of “modernity,” many people continued to believe in the reality of spirits, moral forces, and demons (and even came up with new ones) and the majority continue to hold such beliefs today. So Taylor’s argument shares many parallels with the thinkers I discuss in my book, the thinkers who propagated “the myth of disenchantment,” and yet as it turns out, many of the very thinkers that Taylor discusses in his magisterial work, *A Secular Age*, also believed in spirits and the like.

Moreover, while magic can be defined in very different ways, I show that many people, even influential philosophers and scientists, have continued to believe that “magic is possible.”

By way of example, the famous scientist Francis Bacon (often considered the father of the scientific method, and whose book *New Atlantis* is the source of this journal’s name) saw himself as a Protestant alchemist with a prophetic mission to recover

the lost knowledge of Adam in order to prepare mankind for an imminent apocalypse. He wanted to de-demonize magic, which he believed was possible, but he also argued that “magic aims to recall natural philosophy from a miscellany of speculation to a greatness of works.” In other words, he thought magic could be directly *helpful* to natural philosophy. Elsewhere, he says, “I must here stipulate that magic, which has long been used in a bad sense, be again restored to its ancient and honorable meaning.” (Both quotes here are my own translation from the Latin.) Indeed, he often praised magic and alchemy, which I discuss in the book.

To give another random example, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (whose work Taylor cites) actually argued that magic was real and efficacious. He advocated for what he called “practical metaphysics,” suggesting that it “empirically confirm[s] the possibility of a magical, as opposed to a physical effect, a possibility which the previous century had so peremptorily discarded because it did not want to give credence to any other effect than the physical, brought about in accord with the comprehensible causal nexus.” In sum, in Schopenhauer’s scheme, not only was “white magic” real, there was actually reason to believe that black magic (*maleficium*) was also a description of actual phenomena. And he was not the only modern philosopher to hold such views. The world he and others were describing was certainly not “disenchanted.”

I could keep listing examples, and I do in the book. (I also radically disagree with Taylor’s notion of the “buffered self,” but space here prohibits full elaboration of my counter-argument.)

All that is to say, of the four aspects of Taylor’s theory summarized by Jacobs

above, I agree with one—that there has been a changing attitude toward God over the last five hundred years. In that respect, I think Taylor does an excellent job of tracing a history of theology and demonstrating a position I do in fact share: namely that science does not necessarily exile religion. But I think I have refuted all of Taylor’s other attendant claims about the current world.

In summary, I argue that we might live in a secular age, but we also live in an enchanted one.

What does it mean to be both secular and enchanted? As I have argued, “Attempts to suppress magic have historically failed more often than they’ve succeeded.” I’m not denying that various people, like Richard Dawkins and company, have engaged in certain “disenchancing moves”—these are part of how the “myth of disenchantment” took hold. I even think they have, with their efforts, managed to push “enchantment” out of certain sectors of society and/or stripped certain groups of their belief in particular types of magic. The fluctuating status of spirits in the laboratory and the law courts is one of my earliest intellectual preoccupations. In my previous book (*The Invention of Religion in Japan*, University of Chicago, 2012), I traced both changing scientific attitudes toward spirits and various Japanese governmental campaigns to actively banish “superstitions.”

But in general, these sorts of moves have either failed or succeeded only partially, and it has often been the case that attempts to *disenchant* have often *produced enchantment* by way of backlash, so that little (or no) ground in the fight for “disenchantment” has been gained. In a way it seems to me that the *locus* of enchantment has perhaps shifted, but not enchantment as such. Still,

I’m happy to grant the existence of many exceptions. For most people (elite and popular) the choice is not one between disenchantment and enchantment, science and religion, or myth and mythless rationality, but rather between different competing enchanted life worlds—even if people do not always recognize them as such.

While I share with the readers of *The New Atlantis* certain reservations about the cultural effects of various forms of technology, I suspect the main reason my book has provoked the response it has is because it pushes against the commonly held assumption that science is necessarily disenchanting.

This view seems to be central to the disagreement. As Sikkema summarizes in his review, “technology assumes or encourages a disenchanted view of nature.” Similarly, Jacobs seems to suggest that scientists who performed spiritualist séances did so because “all supposedly paranormal phenomena must justify themselves at the bar of the scientific method, and if they do, then they are no longer paranormal.” However, there is a great deal of counter-evidence for these claims.

First, the myth of disenchantment is much older than modern science. Centuries before sociologists and anthropologists theorized the disenchantment or de-spiritualization of the world, there were folk tales and legends about the departure of the fairies or the vanishing of magic; these stories might be said to be the “beginning of the myth”—but they did not deny the existence of either magic or fairies, but rather said that they were now harder to find than they once were. Magic, once more prominent, had become much scarcer. For instance, Chaucer, in *The Tale of the Wyf of Bathe* (ca. 1380–1400)

already says that the land was once full of fairy enchantment, but by the fourteenth century, nobody could see the elves anymore.

For more than a thousand years, spell-books (such as *The 6th and 7th Books of Moses*, an eighteenth-century text purporting to be written by Moses) often claimed to be recovering vanished or forgotten magical arts. This rhetorical move is part of what gives these books their power. The myth that the spells were scarce or had vanished made them all the more appealing. Many tales begin from the premise that “once upon a time, magic was once a mighty force in the world, but not anymore,” only to then stage some version of magic’s return. It’s a storytelling move that was then picked up on by scientists and philosophers who formulated the idea that modernity was disenchanted. Moreover, as I argue in *The Myth of Disenchantment*, the gods, spirits, or fairies have been disappearing since at least Chaucer and arguably since Plutarch (who, it is worth noting, was writing before the Scientific Revolution, much less before any widespread belief in the power of technology). In this respect, magic is constantly vanishing, even as magicians have claimed to recover it. In sum, disenchantment is actually part of the trope of magic itself. There is no enchantment without disenchantment.

I would add that for most of European history, technology and magic were seen as complementary or even as aspects of the same thing, not as diametric opposites—this idea of an opposition between the two has only been established recently, and it is generally incomplete.

I’d also add that a notion of the “supernatural” is clearly not necessary to enchantment or magic. For instance, the

*Malleus Maleficarum*—widely regarded as the central text in launching the European persecution of witches—explicitly denied that witchcraft was “supernatural” even as it cautioned against what it described as the real powers of demons and curses. By way of another example, almost no non-European languages had terms for the “supernatural” before the modern period. Hence, the vast majority of traditions anthropologists and historians have described as non-Western forms of sorcery, witchcraft, and magic were practiced without a notion of the supernatural.

Second, and more importantly, the whole notion that modern science necessarily produces disenchantment is completely false. It fails on a philosophical level because it has been impossible to successfully and fully demarcate “science” from other domains. As probably the greatest living philosopher of science, Larry Laudan, has shown, there is no unitary scientific method and moreover “there are no epistemic features which all and only the disciplines we accept as ‘scientific’ share in common” and that therefore distinguish them necessarily from pseudoscience. The line between science and pseudoscience is harder to maintain *a priori* than most of us would like. Again, space prohibits a full elaboration, but suffice it to say that science’s boundaries are anything but clear, and if they are unclear, it is impossible to claim that “science” as a whole is necessarily disenchanting.

Moreover, the equation “science equals disenchantment” also does not hold as a historical description. What I mean is that a number of candidates have been proposed as the father of disenchantment, such as Giordano Bruno, Isaac Newton, or Francis Bacon. But each of these “scientists” saw themselves in some significant

sense as a magician. Giordano Bruno has been popularly described as a martyr to science, but today, now that more of his works are available—including his *De magia (On Magic)*—it's clear that Bruno was fascinated with magic and that his aim was not to despiritualize astronomy, as was once thought, but to elaborate an infinite and richly animated cosmos that was in fact full of...spirits and demons. If Bruno was a martyr of any sort, it is hard to see him as a scientific one.

We could say the same for Isaac Newton. For a long time, scholars have known that he had an obsession with alchemy and the philosopher's stone and that he dedicated much of his life to searching for hidden codes in the Bible. Indeed, Newtonian physics was not the stripped-down mechanisms he is associated with, but a dynamic cosmos inclined toward apocalypse and dissolution, which required active "supernatural" (Newton's word) intervention by God and angels. As John Maynard Keynes famously put it: "Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians." But Newton was far from the last of his kind.

I could keep going. It is often held that few oppositions were more fundamental than that between science and magic, but historians of science have been providing counter-evidence for a long time now, as study after study turns up individual scientists' and philosophers' alchemical experiments, magical preoccupations, or mystic visions. In sum, it is easy to show the magical or spiritualist engagements of leading scientists from Robert Boyle to biologists like Alfred Russel Wallace and inventors like Thomas Edison to the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Brian Josephson, or from the major theorists of the Scientific Revolution to those of quantum physics.

The latter reference to quantum physics isn't accidental. While normally connections between quantum theory and mysticism are seen as a later New Age imposition, there is a reason that when Robert Oppenheimer witnessed the first nuclear detonation he turned to a quote from the *Bhagavad Gita*—namely, that the original quantum theorists (especially Wolfgang Pauli and company) were equally engaged with mysticism and Eastern thought.

There is a way in which modern physics is perhaps getting more, rather than less, open. At the very least it is possible to argue, as I do in the book, that the mechanization of the world picture is not an accurate description of the history of physics. It has often been suggested that the very act of producing a systematic image of the world has led toward the evacuation of meaning. But a closer look at the history of physics shows this image not to cohere.

Moreover, this wasn't just a historical accident. *Contra* Taylor and others' notions of the loss of a universe of moral or intelligent forces, panpsychism has been a persistent counter-current in philosophical circles of well-known thinkers—including Spinoza, Leibniz, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Margaret Cavendish, Julien La Mettrie, Gustav Fechner, Ernst Mach, Henry David Thoreau, C. S. Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, Samuel Alexander, Charles Strong, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, Albert Schweitzer, Arthur Koestler, and Gregory Bateson—who all argued that the material universe should be thought of as spiritualized, thoroughly animated, or possessed of mind and awareness.

As to why it persists, I think the notion that science is disenchanting is like

a range of other widely held myths about science. For some of these I would direct readers of this journal to the absolutely wonderful volume Ronald Numbers edited, *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, which challenges such other widely held notions as that (as various chapter titles put it) “the Rise of Christianity Was Responsible for the Demise of Ancient Science,” “Medieval Christians Taught That the Earth Was Flat,” “Galileo Was Imprisoned and Tortured for Advocating Copernicanism,” “Modern Science Has Secularized Western Culture,” and other similar ideas.

Moreover, as I say explicitly, I think disenchantment itself is a myth with real effects. The myth of disenchantment is a living myth precisely because we don’t see it as a myth. My general feeling is that Sikkema, and perhaps to a lesser extent Jacobs, have bought into the myth I’m trying to undo. Both Sikkema and Jacobs seem to suggest that science necessarily strips away certain kinds of beliefs. But that doesn’t work as an empirical description. So when Sikkema says “disenchantment is the water in which we swim,” I agree completely—I am trying to get people to become aware of that water, and why they are in it in the first place.

In sum, while I very much appreciate many of their insights and generous comments, I think Jacobs, Sikkema, and I are talking past each other when it comes to the definition of disenchantment. I also disagree with Charles Taylor (even though we have some significant points of agreement) because I see him as perpetuating the same myth that I have traced the history of and undone in my book. The same might be said to be true of Sikkema. Part of why the myth of disenchantment is so persistent is because people continue to

believe in it even in the face of counter-evidence. We have adopted the idea that science and magic are necessarily mutually opposed, but as I believe I have shown, they are not.

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Thank you for publishing Doug Sikkema’s review of Jason Josephson-Storm’s *The Myth of Disenchantment*. While Sikkema is ultimately dismissive, his account is sufficiently rich and attentive to send many readers (I hope) to the book itself. Those of us who are not (like Sikkema himself) card-carrying Taylorites will roll our eyes when we come to Sikkema’s assertion that Josephson-Storm—like all critics of *A Secular Age*, it seems—has simply missed the “key point” of Charles Taylor’s massive book (and never mind the improbability of missing any point in a book in which every significant assertion is repeated at least three times): *Of course* Taylor recognizes that “occult practice and belief in God” continue to exist, but they “now occur within a culture that takes disenchantment as a basic assumption.”

This claim that criticism of *A Secular Age* rests on a misreading is a familiar move, but Sikkema adds a twist. He says that he kept waiting for Josephson-Storm to explain why (if the argument of *The Myth of Disenchantment* is sound) so many people continue to find the narrative of disenchantment plausible. Funny. I’ve often wondered about that myself. What *would* it take—if Josephson-Storm’s book didn’t so much as dent Sikkema’s conviction—to persuade him that Taylor’s thesis about our “age” is wrong? What *would* count as

counter-evidence, not to be merely waved away with the claim that we nigglers have missed the point, again?

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**D**OU G SIKKEMA RESPONDS: I want to thank Jason Josephson-Storm and John Wilson for their responses to my review of *The Myth of Disenchantment*. There is much here to chew on and it has been helpful for my own thinking on this topic.

However, I still think we are talking past each other when it comes to the two points of contention Professor Josephson-Storm notes: the meaning of disenchantment, and the relation between science and disenchantment.

Throughout his reply, Josephson-Storm suggests that disenchantment simply means that “people no longer believe in spirits, myth, or magic.” And he argues that this idea is itself a myth, that it “does not accurately describe the world we live in,” because throughout modernity “many people continued to believe in the reality of spirits, moral forces, and demons.” And his book (like his letter) does fantastic work showing that belief in all of these things continues apace today. So he concludes, *à la* Bruno Latour’s “we have never been modern,” that “we have never been disenchant-ed.” Accepting his definition, I would have to agree.

But I think the meaning of disenchantment he provides is just too limited and is precisely the “subtraction story” that Charles Taylor is not interested in telling—subtraction stories, as Taylor puts it, being “stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves

from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.” (That Josephson-Storm offers a subtraction story is why, to answer Mr. Wilson’s criticism, even though I’m much less a card-carrying Taylorite than he might imagine, I am not convinced by Josephson-Storm’s argument. At least on this front.) Josephson-Storm might just as easily have noted that Taylor himself is a practicing Catholic who prays to an invisible God and fears an invisible devil. If Taylor believed that we are really disenchant-ed, as Josephson-Storm defines it, Taylor would simply have to look at his own attendance at Mass and ask himself: Well, what gives? The story doesn’t bear out.

Rather, and what I think is missing from this otherwise remarkable book, is to note that Taylor’s take on disenchantment is but a piece in the bigger story he’s telling to help us get the “feel” of our secular age. The meaning of disenchantment, then, should not be divorced from this broader concern. No matter how many stories of scientists who were interested in the paranormal or the occult (or the church, I would add), the book never acknowledges just *why* these stories were excised from school textbooks. Who made that decision? Or *why* (as Alan Jacobs and I both argued in different ways) did the Curies attempt to validate these “paranormal” experiences *using the criteria of modern science*? The natural sciences, once seen as the handmaiden to metaphysical speculation by both the Greeks and Christians, have now come to delimit belief. Something has changed.

And this leads to the second point, regarding the relation between science and disenchantment. I think I need to make a more careful distinction here between science—very broadly understood as the



pursuit of truth via the scientific method of hypothesis, experimentation, and observation that leads to always-provisional conclusions—and *scientism*—the belief that all investigations of philosophy, religion, and the social sciences, must be validated by the methods of the natural sciences. It is this *overstepping* of science, I argue, that distorts our perception of both religion and science, marginalizing belief and discarding magic. Peter Harrison's *The Territories of Science and Religion* (2015) and Alvin Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (2011) are just two helpful accounts of how the relatively recent phenomenon of scientism has come to cloud other discourse.

All this to say: Science, as vague and unhelpful as the term may be, is not to blame for disenchantment. It is merely a method, albeit limited, for knowing *how* the world functions. In older conceptions, it was actually a way of being in the world largely compatible with belief. When practiced within its bounds, it is incapable of exiling religion or superstition since it is not of their order. And I think I would reframe the conclusion of my review so as not to give a hint that I think this to be the case. *Scientism*, rather, is more likely the culprit. It is this bastard form of science, this colonizing tyrant running amok in our modern universities, that has created the real source of conflict between itself and religion, magic, and even science properly understood.

Finally, that great list of thinkers Josephson-Storm includes in his letter, those who argued for an animate, mind-filled cosmos, largely confirms my point. You don't need what he calls a "counter-current" of champions for an enchanted world *unless* the main current is presumably disenchanting. If Thoreau's take on a

sentient natural world, for instance, were a given for all in Concord and beyond, he'd hardly need to articulate it in his journal.

But this leads to a broader question, and one not raised in Josephson-Storm's book or his letter, but one worth considering: What does the contestation of a myth say about its hold over us? Is the notion of myth in Mary Midgley's sense of the term (the "myths we live by"), or Taylor's "social imaginary," still helpful, or might we be better thinking about (dis)enchantment through another, less totalizing, analogy? In *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), Kenneth Burke wrote a brilliant little parable about the nature of public thought that might prove useful here:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

To claim "we're all disenchanting now," as Taylor does and I have too, is to imply that the broad mass of people in a given time and place share a certain set of assumptions. But the terrain of human thought and behavior is so infinitely complex, so

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filled with contestation and subtle change, that I wonder how one might ever presume to “speak for” such a mass in any meaningful way. The analogy of the Burkean parlor in which we find ourselves, even if it’s currently presided over by some loud-speaking adherents of scientism, as

I believe it is, may give hope that there are others—many of them—in the room partaking in quieter conversations of resistance who may, as the conversation goes on, eventually change the tenor and thrust. I hope so. And, I believe, so does Professor Josephson-Storm.