Religion without Magic: Responding to the Natural World[∗]

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The "disenchantment" of the world can be traced back to the tendency (from the early modern period onwards) to relegate meaning and value to the subjective domain, leaving us with a bleached out, value-free conception of objective reality. What might it be to recover a reenchanted understanding of the world, where meaning and value regain their objective status? Given that human beings appear to have an ineradicable need to "enchant" their world in some way or another, it might be supposed that rejecting a theistic foundation for meaning and value leaves us free to devise alternative frameworks of our own to do the job. But could such a project succeed? The difficulty here is that of seeing how meaning and value could be constructed or invented, as opposed to being discovered or responded to. Yet if theism is true, we do not have to "reenchant" the cosmos, since it is already enchanted, though not in any magical or "spooky" sense, but because it is replete with objective beauty and goodness. Our task will then be to cultivate responsiveness to the properties that are already there. But the idea of a halfway house, where we can resist theism but preserve genuine objective value is an illusion. If we buy into a worldview that strips out value from the world, then nothing we can do will serve to put it back again.

Preamble

Let me begin with Max Weber's celebrated phrase 'disenchantment of the world' (*Entzauberung der Welt*), which obviously informs the theme of this volume. The phrase, which appeared in a 1919 paper reflecting on the rise of science in the modern world,[1] has become a sort of shorthand for referring to the way which the scientific outlook appears to have displaced, or at least pushed into retreat, the religious framework that was once so central to our view of ourselves and our relationship to the cosmos of which we are a part.

In what follows, I want to consider three possible interpretations of the notion of disenchantment. These are simply ways in which people today might construe the notion: I shall not primarily be concerned with historical exegesis, or with what Weber himself may have meant by the term, though some of what I say will connect with ideas he raises. For each of the three possible senses of disenchantment, I shall consider a corresponding remedy – so that alongside the three types of disenchantment we shall have three possible attempts at 'reenchantment'. My interest in the notions of enchantment, disenchantment and reenchantment are, as will become apparent, connected in large part with the question of what it is to subscribe to a religious, and in particular theistic, worldview. I hope by the end of the paper it may become a little clearer what it might be to recover a religious understanding of the world.

Disenchantment as 'de-magicking'

My first sense of 'disenchantment' might be glossed 'de-magicking', and directly relates to the etymology of the German term. The primary meaning of the German word *Zauber* is 'magic', and Weber's use of the term could be taken to imply that traditional religious belief involved regarding

[1] "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by the disenchantment of the world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations." (*Es ist das Schicksal unserer Zeit, mit der ihr eigenen Rationalisierung und Intellektualisierung, vor allem: Entzauberung der Welt, daß gerade die letzten und sublimsten Werte zurückgetreten sind aus der Öffentlichkeit, entweder in das hinterweltliche Reich mystischen Lebens oder in die Brüderlichkeit unmittelbarer Beziehungen der Einzelnen zueinander*.) Max Weber, *Wissenschaft as Beruf* [1919].

the world as subject to all sorts of mysterious, quasi-magical or supernatural forces or entities. Certainly this is the assumption made by many secular philosophers today, and indeed they have devised a pejorative label – 'spooky' – to record their disdain for such phenomena and for the worldview that supposedly relied on them. The naturalist creed that dominates so much contemporary philosophy accepts, either implicitly or explicitly, a swift *modus tollens* argument about the spooky that conveniently disposes of religious belief:

> (i) R>S: Religious belief entails the existence of spooky phenomena;
> But (ii) NOT S: there are no such phenomena;
> Therefore (iii) NOT R: religious belief is false.

Yet if we look for example at the founding texts of Christianity, we find that the supposed emphasis on magical or spooky occurrences is rarely to be found. The figure of Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, is not that of a magician, casting spells or invoking occult forces. He is a preacher and a healer. The great bulk of his utterances are in line with the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible: the predominant emphasis is on the moral requirements of justice and righteousness, mercy and compassion. And the acts of healing, again following a pattern found earlier in the lives of the Old Testament prophets, are presented as signs and wonders, where what comes to the fore is not so much the paranormal as the moral dimension, connected for example with the need for faith, or with the cleansing of sin.

If 'enchantment' means that the world conceived in religious terms is a world full of magical or occult forces and entities, then whatever may be true of certain kinds of pagan religion, the world described in the Christian Gospels is very much *not* of this kind. One of the few instances of supernatural beings entering the stage in the Gospels is in the references to angels. at the end of the Temptation story, where Christ retires into the wilderness, and undergoes a mental ordeal in which he heroically *resists* the Satanic lure of supernatural demonstrations of authority – note the explicit rejection of supernatural powers – and at the conclusion of the ordeal we are told that 'angels came and ministered to him' (Matthew 4:11). But what exactly is the significance of such beings? We are familiar with many beautiful depictions of angels in Christian art, most notably in the Italian painters of the fourteenth and fifteenth century;[2] but it would surely be a piece of naïve literalism to think that the difference between the outlook in the fifteenth – or even the first – century and the present day outlook was that people in those days thought angels were likely to pop up all over the place, whereas now we know there are no such beings.

Nevertheless, angels are indisputably mentioned in the Gospel text; so even if we don't understand them in a crudely literal way, don't we have to admit that *some* kind of supernatural forces or powers are involved? And in any case, doesn't the entire biblical narrative presuppose at least one indisputably supernatural entity, namely God? So (the secularist may say) isn't our original dismissive modus tollens argument basically sound? Traditional theistic religion surely does posit the existence of the spooky – certainly at least one great spook, the great spirit that is God. And insofar as science has banished supernatural entities, it has 'de-magicked' or 'de-spooked' the cosmos, so that there is now no room for God.

This is a familiar enough picture, but I want to suggest that for several reasons it is misleading. As many philosophers of religion and theologians have pointed out, orthodox mainstream theism does *not* regard God as a 'thing' – an additional entity alongside all the other entities in the cosmos. God is, to borrow a phrase of Aquinas, 'outside the order of entities', the source and ground of the very existence of the world, rather than an extra spooky supernumerary that could be removed from the cosmos while leaving it in other respects as it is.[3] I have argued elsewhere that on balance the

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[2] See for example Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* (1500), or Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks* (*c,* 1485), both recently discussed in an interesting paper by Anthony O'Hear 'Christian Mysteries in the Renaissance' (typescript).

[3] "… extra ordinem entium existens, velut causa quaedam profundens totum ens et omnes eius differentias." Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* [*Sententiae super Peri Hermeneias,* 1270-71], I, 14.

term 'supernatural' turns out to be more of a hindrance than a help when it comes to explicating what is involved in holding a theistic outlook.[4] It may invite us to 'locate' God as an item 'beyond' the natural world, as if there are two worlds, and two kinds of being – those that dwell here in the physical cosmos, and those that dwell in 'another place', perhaps visiting our universe from time to time. That is of course a crude caricature, but as so often when we are dealing not with empirical hypotheses but with metaphysical frameworks of interpretation, a certain image may hold us captive, even though when challenged we would say that 'of course we did not quite mean *that*.' It is very easy, as Nicolas Malebranche warned in the seventeenth century (following the much earlier lead of Aquinas), to 'humanize' God – to construe him as a kind of entity in addition to those we know of already, but then to add that he is an entity of a supernatural kind. Even when, following Scripture, we call God a 'mind' or 'spirit', warns Malebranche, we should use such language not so such to show positively what God is as to indicate that he is not material. And even this is not quite right, since the infinite God

> contains within him the perfections of matter while not being material, just as he includes the perfections of created minds without being a mind in the way we conceive of minds. His true name is HE WHO IS, i.e. unrestricted being, all being, the infinite and universal being.[5]

Malebranche is clearly influenced by Aquinas here, though it is perhaps worth pointing out that one can see a not entirely dissimilar conception even in the very different system of Spinoza, for whom, in the words of Philip Clayton, 'God cannot mean personal presence, or the presence of one substance to others', since for Spinoza 'God is the framework, the one absolute substance or context, within which all else exists.'[6] At all events, Malebranche's conception of God as the infinite source of being, who contains within himself the perfections of matter and of mind, points to the traditional idea that all created things bear in some way the stamp of the divine, albeit in some cases very remotely and indistinctly.[7] This provides a further reason why the term 'supernatural' can be unhelpful, namely that it risks removing God from the world we know, the very world which is our principal means of access to the divine.

The theist is not so much positing extra entities in addition to the natural cosmos, as refusing to accept the account of 'nature' as it is understood by contemporary so-called 'naturalists', namely as something whose fundamental character is exhausted by the categories of the physical sciences. Nature for the theist is 'charged with the grandeur of God', in the poet Hopkins' famous phrase, shot through with meaning and value. (I shall come back to the concept of nature later on.)

So the whole idea that science has removed the spooky from the cosmos rests on what I take to be a kind of category mistake, or a distorted picture of the kind of thing reflective theists believe about God. Of course there are many kinds of believers, and since the nature of God has always traditionally been supposed to be beyond human comprehension, it is no surprise that many people prefer to deal with crude substitutes for the divine; and I would not deny that some people have conceived of God as a kind of supernatural Cartesian ghost. But those philosophers of religion who wish to 'reenchant' the world, or resist its disenchantment, by nailing their colours to the masthead of a dualistic or Cartesian ontology seem to me to be barking up the wrong tree, partly for the

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[4] See John Cottingham, *In Search of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2019), Ch. 5, sectn 2.

[5] Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* [*Le recherche de la vérité,* 1674], Bk III, Part 2, Ch. 9, p. 251.

[6] Philip Clayton, 'The Religious Spinoza', in C. Firestone and N. Jacobs (eds.), *The Persistence of the Sacred in Modern Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2012), p. 73. Cf. Spinoza *Ethics* Book I, prop. 36, start of Appendix.

[7] See René Descartes, *Conversation with Burman* [1648]*,* AT V 156: CSMK 340. 'AT' refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSMK' refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff , D. Murdoch and A. Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, The Correspondence. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Malebranchian reasons just mentioned, and partly because there are better strategies for defending the cause of religion than by attempting to provide a philosophical vindication of spooky phenomena.

I think we can get some idea of the incongruity of such a strategy by looking at a curious corner of our modern popular culture, where we do seem to be witnessing a bizarre attempt to reenchant the world in just this manner. In a survey carried out in the UK by the National Centre for Social Research in 2017, for the first time a majority (53 percent) ticked the 'no religion' box. Yet *in spite of that*, the researchers noted that many people in this category were increasingly having recourse to concepts that seem to fall into the category of the supernatural. In the Twitter-sphere, and other social media, it turns out that people who die are often addressed as if the electronic messages will somehow be able to reach them in some supernatural domain. 'Fly with the angels in the stars,' was one of many tweets to the cosmologist Stephen Hawking after his death in March 2018, even though in his lifetime Hawking himself had dismissed the afterlife as a fairy story.

From the twitter evidence, there appears to be growing eagerness to promote and endorse the strange idea that when people die they become *angels* (though of course this is from the standpoint of traditional theistic doctrine a highly unorthodox idea, which has no basis in scripture or ecclesiastical doctrine). A recently broadcast BBC World Service report on this phenomenon cited the case of Jade Goodie, a British Reality TV star who died of cancer in 2009: among 1,100 tweets subsequently examined by the sociologist Tony Walter there were only 13 references using conventional religious language (such as 'may your soul rest in peace') but over 167 references to Jade being 'with the angels' or having actually *become* an angel; a typical phrase was 'you have gained your angel-wings'.[8]

What are we to make of these messages? Are they just banal and rather tasteless bits of chatter – a result of the hyper-egalitarian principle fostered by social media of everyone being allowed to 'have their say', even if they have nothing coherent or sensible to contribute? It is I suppose conceivable that those who posted these tweets were sincerely committed to the idea that the dead live on as angels, though it's possible that it is just a passing social media fashion, a kind of mindless *meme* spreading round the twitter-sphere like an infection.

But if we take it more seriously (and Professor Walter uncovered some evidence from interviews that it appeared to be sincerely motivated), then it would seem to be, admittedly in a rather inchoate and inarticulate way, a return, or attempted return, to an enchanted or supernaturalist conception of the cosmos. So we might infer from such phenomena that the demise of the theistic worldview has left the population at large without a framework of concepts and categories for coming to terms with the traumas and difficulties of human life, and that people are casting around to devise alternative categories that appear to bring them comfort. One attitude emerging from the survey which seemed fairly typical was that of one of the interviewees, Michaela, who said she grew up as a Catholic in Austria, but found that 'Going into church, confessing my sins, and things like that didn't ring true to me. It was all about heavy energy and lots of judgement. When I moved to London, I could finally break free from all of the traditions and I could *make up my own beliefs*, gaining my own freedom, and that feels good.'

A maxim often attributed to G. K. Chesterton is that when people cease to believe in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.[9] One general inference from the survey I have just referred to might be that human beings have an ineradicable need to 'reenchant' their world in some way or another, and that if traditional religious frameworks have lost their power to bestow meaning, they will simply *invent* categories of their own to do the job (one might call this reenchantment as remagicking by invention). But could such a project succeed? The obvious obstacle

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[8] Reported by Jane Little on the BBC world service, in the series *Heart and Soul: personal approaches to Spirituality through the world,* in the episode 'Hashtag Pray', broadcast on the BBC World Service, 21 October 2018.

[9] "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense" (G.K. Chesterton, "The Oracle of the Dog", 1923); "You hard-shelled materialists were all balanced on the very edge of belief — of belief in almost anything. ("The Miracle of Moon Crescent", 1924). Both stories are in the collection *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (1926).

is the difficulty of seeing how meaning and value, or indeed truth, could be manufactured or invented in this way, as opposed to being *discovered* or *responded* to (I shall come back to this point later). At all events, the kind of deliberate attempt to bring back enchantment by *fiat*, by making something up, seems a desperate and doomed strategy, even though one may of course have sympathy for the rootless lives of those who are driven to make the attempt.

Disenchantment as flattening

I now move on to my second sense of 'disenchantment', namely disenchantment as 'flattening'. The idea here is that following the scientific revolution, our conception of how to understand the world has been levelled out or *flattened*, so that we are prepared to accept only one type of framework for making sense of things, namely the framework of explanatory science. One symptom of this is that religious beliefs have often been forced into a quasi-scientific template, and interpreted as a set of supposed explanatory hypotheses. As a corrective to this trend, it's helpful I think to go back to some of the insights of Wittgenstein, many of whose ideas have, in my view, suffered an unfortunate eclipse in the naturalistically oriented philosophical climate of the last few decades. In his 'Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*' Wittgenstein argues that the anthropologist James George Frazer committed a fundamental error in his account of ritual practices, by trying to understand them in quasi-scientific terms, as aimed at the production of certain effects.[10] Elsewhere, Wittgenstein makes an important distinction between *faith* and *superstition*. Superstition, unlike faith, 'springs from fear and is a sort of false science'.[11] To take the baptism of a child as an example, if this is motivated by the belief that it will make the child's life more lucky or more successful, we have a case of mere superstition – a kind of primitive pseudo-technology. To promote the child's health and wellbeing one would do far better to have recourse to modern scientific medicine. But if the baptism is an act of joyful affirmation and thanksgiving for the new life – what Wittgenstein called a 'trusting' (*ein Vertrauen*) – then it is a genuine manifestation of religious faith.

Going back for a moment to our earlier discussion of the appearance of angels in the Temptation story in the Gospels, the moral is that we should beware of an over-rationalistic approach to what is meant by the scriptural references to angels or other such beings – as if the reviving refreshment Christ received after his temptation ordeal was rather like a supporter arriving with a tray of food and drink, except that the nutrition on this occasion was of a more magically effective kind than any ordinary terrestrial supporter could provide. The ministry of the angels cannot be understood in isolation from the moral and spiritual framework that gives the story its meaning: the ordeal is resisted, not magically, but through moral courage and a trustful determination to hold fast to the good.

It is interesting to note here that when discussing *Entzauberung* Weber links it with the notions of 'rationalization and intellectualization' – *Rationalisierung und Intellektualisierung*. I've already suggested that if *Entzauberung* is taken to mean 'getting rid of the magic', it is not a very happy notion when applied to the religious narratives, since it's not in fact clear that these narratives do hinge on the assumption of magical forces in the way supposed. If we focus instead on Weber's reference to the intellectualizing tendency of modern thought, it can I think be used to point us towards a very distorting way in which religious thought and practice has come to be perceived. From our modern scientific perspective it is all too easy to interpret religious behaviour *instrumentally,* as a kind of primitive technique for bringing about results that we now, from our superior standpoint, know to have been ineffective. To be sure, one can point to religious words and actions that fall into this category – in other words the category of superstition or magic. We all know the story of how the bones of the saints were supposed in the middle ages to be efficacious in curing illnesses, though even here (again following Wittgenstein) we should be wary of supposing that the veneration of relics was simply a crudely utilitarian attempt to bring about what we now know to be much better secured

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[10] See further Jacques Bouveresse, 'Wittgenstein's Critique of Frazer', *Ratio* 20:4 (December 2007), reprinted in J. Preston (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
[11] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 82.

by modern medicine. But authentic religious practice, as it is described in the Scriptures, is never a superstitious endeavour to secure benefits by magical means. The Hebrew Bible contains countless warnings against superstition and idolatry, and in the New Testament, the very paradigm of religious prayer offered by Christ puts in the first and most important place a principle of humility and submission 'Thy Will Be Done', rather than a magical formula for getting results.

Once we have been put on our guard against the dangers of flattening, of forcing religious language and practice into this kind of instrumental template, we can perhaps glimpse a strategy for recovering its depth. Modern philosophy of religion, like philosophy in general, especially in the anglophone world, has often tended to model itself on the austere, impersonal language of scientific inquiry – trying to eliminate all nuance and ambiguity, and to tackle problems in increasingly small and intricate parcels where everything is made maximally explicit. But for many of the issues that arise in a religious context, for example, the problems connected with human suffering, sin, evil, repentance, conversion, and redemption, simply cannot be properly dealt with using these austere and impersonal techniques of inquiry. The key point here is that much religious discourse is *multilayered* – it carries a rich charge of symbolic significance that resonates with us on many different levels of understanding, not all of them, perhaps, fully grasped by the reflective, analytic mind. Any plausible account of the human condition must make space for the crucial role of imaginative, symbolic, and poetic forms of understanding in deepening our awareness of ourselves and the reality we inhabit. And for this reason it may be a serious error to try to understand religion in a 'flattened' way, to reduce all religious thinking to a bald set of factual assertions whose literal propositional content is then to be clinically isolated and assessed.

The reality with which religious thought and practice attempts to make contact is not a straightforward collection of states of affairs or verifiable facts. We need to approach it 'lightly and poetically' as Rowan Williams has put it,[12] not trying to insert or reinsert magical properties, but rather *being more responsive to the properties that are already there.* To do this, we must be ready to discern them in a multi-layered and holistic way, in a way that is open, receptive, porous, instead of detached, controlling, manipulative, experimental. Once we give up the futile attempt to flatten out the world that we are trying to understand, and become open to perceiving its richly contoured structure, the job of reenchantment may not need to be artificially engineered, because we may start to find that the mystery and wonder and splendour was always already there.

Disenchantment as bleaching out

I now come to my third sense of 'disenchantment', namely disenchantment as what may be called bleaching out. In the literal sense of removing all the colours from reality, this has a long history from the early-modern period onwards. Hume superciliously comments on how hard it is to convince the 'peasant' that snow is not really white or fire red. And he refers back explicitly to Locke, who famously attacked what he called the 'vulgar' way of talking, as if light and heat were really in fire, and to Malebranche, who scornfully dismissed the 'error' of supposing that colours are in coloured objects. Though they deploy different arguments and terminology, all three philosophers make the mistake, it seems to me, of privileging the abstract scientific picture of reality (expressed in quantitative, mathematical and mechanical terms) over the 'manifest image' presented to conscious awareness.[13] But their downgrading of the manifest image as less real is a confusion, or at all events philosophically quite unwarranted. Even a philosopher as brilliant as Bertrand Russell was once

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[12] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 34.

[13] See for example Nicolas Malebranche's vigorous attack on the 'error' whereby almost everyone believes that 'heat is in the fire ... and colours in coloured objects' (*Recherche de la Vérité,* Bk I, Ch. xi), and Locke's assault on the 'vulgar' way of talking 'as if Light and Heat were really something in the Fire more than a power to excite [certain] Ideas in us' (*Essay concerning Human Understanding* [1670], Bk II, Ch. xxxi, §2). For a discussion of Descartes's views, which influenced both these thinkers, see Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Ch. 7. The contrast between the 'manifest image' (arising from our ordinary lived experience of the world) and the 'scientific image' was drawn by Wilfred Sellars, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' [1956].

tempted to say – absurdly – that tables and chairs are not 'really' solid, on the spurious grounds that they are made up of atoms that are largely comprised of gaps (the empty space between protons and electrons).[14] The truth, of course, is that the table I write on is really and genuinely solid; this is quite compatible with its being composed of arrangements of atoms which are not themselves solid. *Both* the ordinary macro-properties manifest to consciousness, *and* the scientifically discovered micro-properties, are perfectly genuine, and it is a philosophical mistake to privilege either by saying one is more 'real' than the other.

Nevertheless, the *bleaching fallacy* continues to dominate the modern conception of reality. One of its continuing symptoms is the idea that any apparent 'enchantment' in the world – its vibrant colours, its beauty, its wonder, and indeed any value and meaning found there – must come not from the world but from *us*, and is then foisted on the world by our minds (again this follows Hume, who famously spoke of the mind's tendency to 'spread itself' on external objects). So the resulting picture is that the world is 'bleached', not just of colours, but of all meaning and value, and that any 'enchantment' has to be supplied by us. A recent striking example of this approach appears in a book called *Soul Dust,* by Nicholas Humphrey. Humphrey argues that conscious awareness is a kind of *illusion* created by the brain, or a part of the brain. It is an internal 'magical mystery show' that evolved because of its survival value – roughly because it makes life more enjoyable and motivates people to continue wanting to live.[15]

The suggestion that consciousness is an 'illusion' sounds a disparaging or dismissive one. But to his credit, Humphrey ends up acknowledging that if consciousness is in a certain sense an illusion, it is one that is of vital importance to our human lives. For in virtue of being subjects of experience, we humans live in what Humphrey calls *soul land*:

> Soul land is a territory of the spirit. It is a place where he magical interiority of human minds makes itself felt on every side. A place where you naturally assume that ever other human being lives, as you do, in the extended present of phenomenal consciousness. Where you acknowledge and honour the personhood of others, treating everyone as an independent … responsible … conscious being in his or her own right. … It is a place where the claims of the spirit begin to rank as highly as the claims of the flesh. Where you join hands with others in sharing … the beauties of the world *you have enchanted*. … This spiritual territory is not only where almost all humans do live but where they give of their best.[16]

The glowing encomium to the wonders of 'soul land' reminds us of the use of the term 'soul', as it commonly occurs in novels and poetry and drama and in religious and spiritual writings, where it is used in connection with certain central and deeply significant goals of human life – our quest to find our true 'self' or identity, our search to lead integrated and morally worthwhile lives, our yearning for the affection that can give meaning to our existence, and our longing for the strange exaltation that arises from loving union with another human being or a sense of intimate harmony with the natural world. All these precious elements of our human birthright seem connected with the wondrous domain of 'soul land' – the domain we are able to enter in virtue of what Humphrey terms 'phenomenal consciousness' – the bright flame of conscious awareness with which each of us is endowed.

And yet – and this is where, despite his eloquence, his argument seems to go so curiously astray – Humphrey insists that this magical mystery show is *created by us*. It is *we*, he says, who have enchanted the world. But why are *we* regarded as the creators of the magical show? This can only be because he supposes that all the wonderful properties just listed are not really there. Science – and here once more we find the recurrent doctrinaire privileging of the scientific image over the

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[14] Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Ch. 1.

[15] Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Dust* (London: Quercus, 2011)*,* pp. 49-50. My discussion of Humphrey in this section of the paper draws on material from my *In Search of the Soul,* Ch. 3.

[16] Humphrey, *Soul Dust*, pp. 193-4, emphasis added.

manifest image – science has (supposedly) taught us that the only truly real properties are those expressible in the neutral, quantitatively based terminology of physics and the other natural sciences. So all the wondrous properties glowingly listed by Humphrey cannot, he thinks, be real, but must have been magicked into existence by the mind: 'It was something to live in an enchanted world. But now the canopy has been lifted to reveal who is pulling this levers: it is *you*.'[17]

Yet it is impossible to believe, as Humphrey would have us believe, that all this is just something *we* create. All the wonders that Humphrey, rightly, adverts to are not just smoke and mirrors, a piece of weird magic that somehow evolved as an evolutionary accident, or because it turned out to be somehow advantageous in the struggle for survival. On the contrary, the values and beauties and duties, knowledge of which we gain access to as conscious beings, are *objective* values and requirements that command our respect. We do not create them, we do not magic them into existence, we *respond* to them. The more we think about this, the more Humphrey's idea that it is *we* who call these things into existence feels all wrong. For the phenomenology – the way it feels to the subject – is not that of fantasising or dreaming up or imagining, or of spinning a magical web: it is the phenomenology of *response*, of being confronted by, and often overwhelmed by, something wondrous, something greater than ourselves, that demands an answer from us. We are daily made aware that we are not in sole charge, not deciding by creative fiat what is valuable or what to call important. We are *confronted* – and that does not just mean impinged upon by a meaningless bombardment of particles. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke powerfully expresses it in a famous sonnet about the compelling beauty of a statue of Apollo,[18] there are decisive moments in human experience when we are confronted by something that seems to scrutinize and find us wanting: we are called upon to change, to become something better or to 'give of our best', as Humphrey himself, with commendable honesty, acknowledges. We are called on to embark on the task of 'finding the soul', finding our true selves and realizing the best that we can become.

The fact that we biological creatures have these wondrous powers of conscious awareness, and these powerful moral and spiritual impulses – in short that we manifest all the characteristics traditionally described in terms of having a 'soul' – does not have to be understood as a strange purely internal or subjective phenomenon, a 'magical interiority' in Humphrey's phrase. Nor does it have to be relegated to an special category of the illusory, or regarded as a bizarre cosmic anomaly. For on the theistic picture, all the relevant properties are there already, objectively there, and there is nothing anomalous about this. They are anomalous if the only ultimate reality is nothing more than the quantitative realm of physics; but not anomalous if nature is taken in the way it was generally understood in the middle ages and early-modern period, as reflecting a conscious presence, the source of value and goodness. Even in Aristotle, nature or physis is seen through the lens of his teleological vision of the cosmos. Nature, in this sense 'does nothing in vain', as Aristotle frequently and famously asserts;[19] or as Leibniz put it, reviving and indeed radically updating the Aristotelian notion to fit a Christian context, the 'divine and infinitely marvellous artifice of the Author of nature [ensures] … there is nothing waste, nothing sterile, nothing dead in the universe; no chaos, no confusions, save in appearance.'[20]

There is of course no way of proving the truth of this, or any metaphysical account of the nature of reality. But the choice is clear: either beauty, meaning, value, are objective features of reality, or they are magicked up by the mind. And if we reject the latter account, we have to find some way of articulating a genuinely objectivist account. By genuine objectivity in this context I have in mind the notion of *strong normativity* – the fact that moral values and obligations exert an authoritative demand on us, whether we like it or not. We may often turn away from what is good

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[17] Humphrey, *Soul Dust*, p. 168.

[18] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaïscher Torso Apollos* [from *Der Neuen Gedichte, anderer Teil*, 1908].

[19] For example in *de Caelo* I, 4; *de Partibus Animalium* II, 13. For more on this theme in Aristotle, see R. J. Hankinson, 'Philosophy of Science' in J. Barnes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Ch. 4.

[20] G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology* [1714], §§65, 69; transl. in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.), Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings* (London: Dent, 1973), p. 190.

and right, but even as we do turn away we recognize that moral demands retain an undeniable authority over us. To use an image borrowed from Gottlob Frege in the very different context of logic and mathematics, they are like boundary stones which our thought can overflow but not dislodge.[21] It is the stripping out of this kind of strong normativity that Weber probably had uppermost in his mind in his original article, where he linked disenchantment to the retreat of 'ultimate and sublime values'.

In my view, such values are only truly at home in a theistic cosmos. In the brief final section of this paper, however, I shall simply give some representative examples of alternative secular attempts to provide a grounding for objective value, and point out how they typically slide back into the fallacious idea that we can somehow do the job of reenchantment ourselves.

Reenchantment or response?

As representative of the difficulties facing secular strategies for seeing reality as imbued with objective value, I have space only for two examples. The first is John McDowell, who is particularly relevant here in terms of what I earlier called 'bleaching', since he made a famous analogy between colour properties and value properties. Noting the notorious problems in what he calls 'bald' ethical naturalism, the attempt to 'construct the requirements of ethics out of independent facts about human nature', McDowell relies instead on the idea of *second nature*. In addition to our 'first nature', our physical and biological makeup as investigated by physics, chemistry and biology, we human beings have a 'second nature', acquired through a 'decent upbringing', whereby we are 'alerted' to an objective domain of ethical requirements which are 'there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them.'[22] Through our human upbringing, the long process of acculturation and the moulding of ethical character, our 'eyes are opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature'.[23]

The problem here is that on the McDowell view, the 'reality' of the moral demands to which we are subject is in the end simply a function of a given human culture with a given biological and social history. There is no further, no more ultimate, moral reality to constrain it or measure it against. Yet that brings right up against the difficulty of what has aptly been called the 'radical contingency of the ethical'. The history of our ethical culture is a contingent one; it might have been otherwise, and if it had, then, it seems to follow, even on McDowell's enriched picture of nature, that the relevant ethical 'realities' and 'demands' might have been different. I see no way of escaping the subversive implications of this for what Bernard Williams called the 'peculiar institution' of morality.[24] Once the idea is accepted that the authority and power of the moral demands which seem to call forth our allegiance is simply a function of the contingent culture into which we happen to have been inducted, then true normativity evaporates.[25] We can after all imagine (and indeed there are actual historical examples) of cultures that have inculcated respect for profoundly inhuman practices and attitudes; are we to say that those so indoctrinated have had their eyes opened to certain 'values' and requirements that are 'there in any case'; or are there objective normative standards against which such an inhuman cultural system can be found wanting? But if the latter, then what is the ultimate basis for such objective standards? To put the point another way, it is hard to see how McDowell can in the end provide a proper basis for the kind of strong objectivity and normativity that his conception of the 'reality' of moral demands seems to imply.

[21] Gottlob Frege, *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* [*Die Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, Vol. I, 1893] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 13.

[22] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Lecture IV, §7, p. 82.

[23] McDowell, *Mind and World,* p. 84.

[24] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins, 1985), Ch. 10.

[25] See further John Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical".' In D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 2, pp. 25-43. Compare also John Gray's deflationary claim that the apparent authoritativeness of moral reasons is simply be a 'projection from the ways of life in which human beings are formed.' 'The Paradox of an Atheist Soul', *New Statesman*, 26 February 2020.

My second example is Iris Murdoch, who defends a form of Platonism in her attempt to bring strong, objective normativity back into our worldview. In her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* she advances a worldview which affirms the reality of goodness, or simply 'the good' as a kind of substitute for theism. Her slogan is 'the good is the reality of which God is the dream'[26]. Now a long-standing problem with Platonic metaphysics, never perhaps fully addressed by Murdoch, is that of explaining the ontological status of abstract forms such as 'the Good' – in what sense are they supposed to be 'real'? But even if that worry can be dealt with, it is hard to see how something as inert, impersonal and abstract as a Platonic form could generate normative requirements merely by its being there to be contemplated. Murdoch here remarks that 'of course Plato did not think that morality consisted in staring at an abstract idea', and she goes on to speak of the need for 'an orientation of our energy and appetites', through the power of love.[27] So the Good in whose reality she believes is not after all an inert Form or concept, but a real power, exerting a kind of 'magnetic' force (to use an analogy she frequently deploys), which, in quasi-religious fashion, can 'purify our desires' and be 'inescapably active in our lives'.[28] Although she insists on rejecting the idea of a personal God, it seems that the implications of Murdoch's position come very close to those of theism, notably in her insistence in that we 'experience of the reality of the good' as 'a discovery of something independent of us',[29] something which imposes normative requirements and has transformative power.

The upshot of these worries is that whatever it is that, for Murdoch, underwrites the reality and objectivity of goodness must, on Murdoch's own account, be something active, powerful, independent and authoritative, and capable of transforming our lives. As traditionally conceived, the God of theism manifestly meets these requirements, goodness, authority, power and activity being among the defining characteristics of such a being. But nothing in Murdoch's ontology seems to explain the 'inescapable activity' she wants to attribute to 'the good'. This is not, of course, a knock down argument for the existence of the personal God of theism, but it does suggest that a theistic worldview might provide Murdoch with a more coherent backdrop for many of the things that she herself wants to say about the power of goodness.

If Murdoch were to accept the theistic view of the cosmos, then although unfashionable, her position would at least be consistent. But despite her professed objectivism about value, by the end of the book she seems to me clearly to resile from this position, and slide back into the seductive idea that we can create meaning for ourselves. She returns several times over to a Hindu story of a merchant who was asked by his mother to bring back from his travels a holy relic from one of the saints. Remembering on the way home that he had forgotten this commission, he picks up a dog's tooth from the gutter, and solemnly presents it to his mother. She places it in her chapel where it is venerated and 'it begins miraculously to glow with light'.[30] Returning to the story at the end of the book she quotes Keats and Valery. Keats: 'what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not.' *It must be the truth.* And Valery (cited by Simone Weil): 'Love is a determination to create the being which it has taken for its object.' The dog's tooth, Murdoch reiterates, 'when sincerely venerated glows with light'.[31]

If theism is true, we don't have to 'reenchant' the cosmos, because it is already enchanted, not in any magical sense, but because it is replete with objective beauty and goodness, charged with the grandeur of God. For the theist, our task is to be open to its wonder and its authoritative power, and to orient ourselves towards the normative requirements that we cannot in integrity deny. But the idea of a halfway house, where we can resist theism but preserve genuine objective value is an illusion. If we buy into a worldview that strips out value from the world, then nothing we can do can put it back again.

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[26] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 496.
[27] Murdoch, *Metaphysics,* p. 497.
[28] Murdoch, *Metaphysics,* p. 109.
[29] Murdoch, *Metaphysics,* p. 508.
[30] Murdoch, *Metaphysics,* p. 338.
[31] Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, p. 508.

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