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# A Description of the Natural Place of Magic in Philosophy and Religious Studies

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A DESCRIPTION OF THE NATURAL PLACE OF MAGIC IN PHILOSOPHY AND  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

by

DAMIEN WILLIAMS

Under the Direction of Timothy Renick, PhD.

ABSTRACT:

**The concept of magic is most often considered as a foil by scholars in the fields of philosophy and religious studies, or it is discussed as part of the investigation of “primitive” systems of belief and ritual. In this essay, magic is investigated as a system of inquiry and explanation unto itself, connected to but distinct from both philosophy and religious studies, and an argument is presented for understanding systems of magic as both natural and rational outgrowths of a particular perspective on reality.**

INDEX WORDS: Graduate Thesis, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Magic, Western Esotericism, Occult Studies, New Paradigm Thought.

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RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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DAMIEN WILLIAMS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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May 2008

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother and my father, who always pushed me to do what I loved and to know what it was that I was doing; to Kirsten for conversations and support, even when I was stressed and grumpy; to Brandon, Dennis, and every one of my friends and family who listened to me ramble, and made me refine the mass of thoughts into something communicable; and finally to the memory of Lorraine Wilson, without whom I would not have started upon this particular path, at that particular time. It has made all the difference.

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This work has seen many permutations, iterations and convolutions, and it has been a long, difficult and wonderful journey. I want to thank Brandon Bullard, who provided conversation and discussion; Hal Duncan, who answered e-mails promptly, and concisely; Dr. Robert Almeder without whose book, *Harmless Naturalism*, this particular thesis would not have been possible; my Father, Zechariah Williams, who continually provided questions and seemingly unconnected tangents of thought; my Mother, Carlynn Fuller, for keeping my mind on my deadlines, my requirements, and the meanings and intentions of my work; Lorraine Wilson, for helping to give me direction and a second chance; and last, but certainly not least, Kirsten Brown, for listening.

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## *I. Introduction*

In the history of philosophy and religious studies, there are few concepts so interesting, so beguiling, and so often maligned as magic. Magic—as a concept, as a classification of phenomena, and as a system of explanation—is most often ridiculed and used as a foil to show the strengths of those systems which oppose it. In this thesis, I will argue that magical phenomena, descriptions, and concepts are as valid within their rubric as are scientific descriptions, concepts and investigations within theirs. The question, then, is not one of truth or falsity, but of applicability to experience and consistency of description; the question is “if a system of description yields consistent results from consistent inputs, then is that system not a viable tool?” It is my contention that it is a viable tool, and that each system can be said to accurately describe the world within the context to which it belongs.

Examining the writings of Edward James, Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Clark Glymour, Douglas Stalker, and Anthony Flew, I will investigate what I believe to be the two major arguments against magic and the occult. From there I will move to a consideration what constitutes “natural” and “rational” through the works of Antoine Faivre, James Frazer, Ariel Glucklich and Carl Jung. The first group of authors provides a representation of the breadth and depth of the philosophical and scientific argument against the occult, across roughly thirty years. The second group provides a sampling of those who make an in-depth investigation into magic and the occult, from several disciplines and perspectives. Finally, I will present an argument for viewing magic as natural, taking aspects of and responses to each of the foregoing sections and concluding that, if magic is a descriptive system unto itself, then it has its own rules and should be judged by them rather than by the parameters of another system. While we may be able to

compare the results obtained in any system with those of any other system, the systems are not interchangeable and should not be treated as such.

As we will see, the idea of the natural is intrinsically connected to the idea of the rational and so the two ideas must be considered together if we are to present a view of magic that fits within the commonly accepted concept of nature. In this thesis, the natural and the rational will be considered as separate topics, but there will necessarily be a certain amount of conceptual bleed-over between the discussions.

Why argue for magic at all? Some will undoubtedly say that magic is simply a childish misunderstanding of the nature of cause and effect, a primitive means of seeking to influence the natural world by means which can have no efficacy whatsoever. I believe that magic is more than this. Magic can be understood as a conceptual schema, using language, emotion, objective observation, and subjective experience, and by which the magician may change both her perception of the world and the perception of the world held by those around her. Though this system is not interchangeable with science (and I am in no way making the case that it should be seen as such), the understanding of this process demands attention to detail, consistency of application, and immersion within the natural world, and it is for such an understanding that I argue.

## *II. Opposition to the Idea of Magical Phenomena as Natural or Rational*

### **A. Findings in *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*: Against the Occult**

The 1982 collection *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, edited by Patrick Grim, concerns itself with the ongoing discussion between sceptics, believers, and those ambivalent with regard to what is often termed “occult phenomena.”<sup>1</sup> While a number of objections to belief in the occult are raised, the concerns tend to fall into one of two major categories: 1) Occult phenomena do not fit into rational discourse when placed under investigation, and so must be removed from said discourse, or 2) Occult phenomena are or claim to be unnatural or supernatural, and so are unable to be investigated by the methods of science. The phenomena considered under the label of “occult” are varied, but there is a reason why they all can be placed under a single heading. According to Grim, the term “occult” is used in reference to such things as magic, astrology, parapsychology, alchemy, and even UFO phenomena because there exists no other term “more suitably inclusive and yet unprejudicial.”<sup>2</sup> Using Grim’s inclusive definition, I will explore a few authors to distinguish the major points in their critiques against magic, and I will then focus on two views that I feel best exemplify the essence of the opposition.<sup>3</sup> These authors’ arguments represent some the most important contemporary objections to magic, and the Grim anthology remains the most important academic volume addressing these themes.

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<sup>1</sup> Grim, Patrick, *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, pg. 1-2, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 2.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the first piece in this book is the “Objections to Astrology: A Statement by 186 Leading Scientists,” a famous missive delivered in the journal *The Humanist*, in 1975 (Grim, pg. 14-15). This is a five paragraph statement reflecting the concerns of then-leading scientists that there are no rational reasons for continuing to believe in astrology now that the distances and relative forces of the celestial bodies have been accurately calculated, and understood. They do not, however, investigate the full implications of the study of astrology on its own merits.

## B. The Occult as Irrational

### 1. James, Popper and Kuhn

Edward James seeks to establish criteria which must be met in order for a belief to qualify as rational and to argue that belief in the occult—specifically astrology, due to its reliance on other than purely scientific methods of explanation— fails to meet these criteria.<sup>4</sup> Invoking Thomas Kuhn, he suggests that these requirements are that a system seeks to find reasonable falsifiers for itself, that it engage in the act of extrapolating its qualities to their rational conclusions, and that it “solve puzzles.”<sup>5</sup> This last criteria, played out in the acts of making more and more precise observations and calculations and describing the interactions of the elements of a theory, is central to Kuhn’s account of rationality.<sup>6</sup> According to Kuhn, without these activities the project is not rational and is therefore not useful.

In a parallel fashion, James writes that Karl Popper’s criteria of testability and falsifiability are inapplicable for one of two reasons. The acts of falsification and testing, for Popper, are what make a person or system rational, and astrology fails to attempt either. Popper contends that the true test of a scientific system or explanation is the ability for it to be falsified.<sup>7</sup> As he says in his 1953 lecture, “One can sum all this by saying that *the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability.*”<sup>8</sup> What Popper means by this is that a system that disregards or simply subsumes arguments counter to its position is unscientific and therefore untenable. If the system cannot possibly be falsified, then anything can be fitted under its scope. The system cannot ever be said to fail, and need never be

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 24-32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 87-93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pg. 91.

revised. Popper believes astrology is such a system.<sup>9</sup> Popper's view is indicative of a type of objection to magical and occult phenomena and explanations in that it appeals to the criteria of science and rationality to explain the whole of the phenomenological spectrum, thus begging the question of whether those criteria will properly address every situation. As we will see, this reliance on scientific processes to devise explanations and understandings is not always a satisfactory technique.

Popper declares in his "Science: Conjectures and Refutations" that he believes science to be distinguished from the pseudosciences by the difference between the truly empirical methodology of science and the pseudo-empirical methodology of pseudoscience.<sup>10</sup> The difference, according to Popper, is that while the latter does make use of observational data and experience, it "does not come up to scientific standards."<sup>11</sup> This is because the popular understanding of most scientific theories does not actually reflect the meaning and power of those theories, and so they are applied improperly to the world. Laws concerning natural phenomena, exemplified by theories such as relativity and Newtonian Motion, are indicated by and indicative of rational processes, according to Popper, which means that they can be falsified, tested, and augmented or discarded when they are found to fail.<sup>12</sup> Astrology merely encompasses or enfold all opposition, according to Popper, and does not actually engage in truly empirical testing.

Popper breaks his ultimate conclusions down into the following seven points: 1) It is easy to find verification for anything, if we look for verification; 2) Confirmations should only count for "risky predictions," or ones without which we would have expected some other result; 3)

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg. 90-91.

“Every ‘good’ scientific theory is a prohibition,...The more a theory forbids, the better it is;” 4) if a theory cannot be refuted by any conceivable event, then it is not a scientific theory; 5) Every real test of a theory “is an attempt to falsify it;” 6) Confirming evidence should only count when it is the result of a genuine failed attempt to falsify the theory; and 7) when found to be false, a genuinely testable theory can be “saved” by the addition of an *ad hoc* explanation, but this is done at the cost of lowering the scientific status of the theory.<sup>13</sup> With these seven principles, Popper has simply more clearly explicated his stance that a theory is not scientific, is not a genuine reflection of or investigation into the natural world, unless it is testable, refutable, or falsifiable.<sup>14</sup>

In the process of investigating these claims, Popper puts the Freudian theories of Super-Ego, Ego, and Id on the same footing as astrology, saying that without the ability to test and observe the components, there is simply no way to know, at this point, whether those three parts of the “human psyche” actually exist.<sup>15</sup> Simple inductive reasoning from past experience is not enough for Popper, and must be augmented with predictions, falsification attempts and other observational tests; without these, a system is not scientific and has nothing to say to the scientific community.

While James agrees with Popper and Kuhn that astrology is not rational, he rejects their specific arguments for this position. James’ first objection is to assert that the behaviours of testing and falsification in fact are engaged in by astrologers, who seek to revise and account for any failure they encounter in their system; specifically James points to the astrological theory of “subsumption,” by which, for example, an incorrect horoscope calling for good fortune is

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pg. 92.

subsumed under a correct horoscope calling for misfortune.<sup>16</sup> Hence “it was the horoscope of Hiroshima that proved dominant during the waning days of World War II,” because while the horoscopes of individuals may have forecast fortune and health, the horoscope for the city as whole predicted doom and misfortune.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, if Popper means to say that all of astrology fails to test itself or to seek falsification, James asserts that this is because astrology considers itself a “discipline or area of study...and hence is no more to be falsified than physics or astronomy.”<sup>18</sup> An entire system, to James, is not to be falsified or tested, and though he spends little time on the subject, I believe that this distinction between disciplines or systems of thought and the laws that arise within them is an important one and will be discussed at length in a later chapter.

James gives much more attention to Kuhn’s concept of “puzzle solving,” ultimately determining that though astrology and systems like it may not falsify or puzzle-solve using the tools of rationality, they *do* perform these actions within their own methodology.<sup>19</sup> Astrology, James writes, takes clear stock of its internal behaviours, and seeks to address any faults or flaws that it finds, though not necessarily by the means of science.<sup>20</sup> Though this may not be “rationality” as a scientific methodology would have it, James writes that the requirement of calling these methods objectively irrational would require a much more in-depth investigation than either Popper or Kuhn seems willing to perform.<sup>21</sup> If this is the case, James writes, then we cannot validly attack the methods and systematic requirements of astrology, or any other occult

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pg. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pg. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



phenomena, because we have not done the investigative work required to fully understand the methods that we are proposing to disabuse.

That being said, James offers another type of argument against occult explanations, in general, and astrology, in particular, which he feels rests upon the *content* of these systems, rather than their methods. This argument, he claims, will help to keep the investigator from simply quickly dismissing the system as “irrational” without proper consideration.<sup>22</sup>

James develops an argument based on the content of astrology, showing each aspect of astrology, as a system, to be attributable to human nature and experience, rather than any supreme cosmic truth. According to James, the claims of astrology hinge upon a series of dubious claims: 1) The influence that the position of the sun, at sunset, in a particular month had on determining the time of the signs; 2) the unequal amount of time the sun spends in a given constellation, necessitating the division of the heavens into the “signs of the zodiac;” 3) the fact that the signs fluctuate, with the equinox moving backward one sign every 2,140 years; 4) the fact that there is no account given as to *why* the stars so influence the lives of humans; 5) the fact that, statistically speaking, every prediction of astrology can consistently be shown to be false.<sup>23</sup> And yet, he tells us, the dubiousness of these claims still does not show that astrology, as a system, is “irrational;” instead it shows only that there are multiple interpretations of the data available for review, which is a criticism that can be as easily levelled against a variety of scientific tenets as against occult ones. What we really want to do, according to James, is make certain that we never have to engage astrologers on “the issues,” as he calls them; we want to make ludicrous the position of the occult explanation, and we have not yet found the means by

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pg. 25-26.

which to do it.<sup>24</sup> We have rejected Popper’s first, methodologically-based critique because “no formula can portray (ir)rationality,” and we have rejected James’ content-based critique because the difficulties for astrology, in that schema are of no different type than those that plague any scientific discipline; fuller investigations of the content-based critique would seem to put the two positions of astrology and science on the same level, and that is precisely what James says we want to avoid.<sup>25</sup> So where does this leave us? We must try another critique until we can completely roust astrological explanation, James writes, and this alternate critique is again based upon methodology.

In James’ new attempt, we must not try to literally formulate the criteria necessary for rationality, as Popper attempts. Rather we must look at the intricate act of reasoning, itself.<sup>26</sup> James believes that astrology attempts to qualify as a form of reasoning, but that it drastically fails to qualify for the “rationality race” because it fails to exhibit the basic coherence and puzzle-solving skills necessary for people to apply astrology as a tool.<sup>27</sup> James believes that as we listen to the reasoning of the astrologers—though it may pain us to do so—we will realize that what they have to say is to be rejected because it is plain, common, banal.<sup>28</sup> The astrologer, according to James, is not doing anything new in terms of explanatory capability and is committing basic errors of reasoning (a problem faced by any fledgling student of logic).<sup>29</sup> James gives us a list of four operational errors in the methodology of the astrologer.

Firstly, there are the basic logical fallacies, such as appeal to authority (relying on the testimony of Johannes Kepler, in an area to which his authority as an astronomer does not

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pg. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pg. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pg. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pg. 27-28.

necessarily apply), and vague analogy (“the structure of the atom is similar to that of the solar system,” when, James notes, recent advances in quantum physics have shown this to be only superficially true). He also sees astrology relying on “false cause,” as presented in the following story: “On the day Queen Wilhelmena of the Netherlands married only one other woman in the country was allowed to marry. She was a friend of the Queen, her name too was Wilhelmena, and she was born on the same day as the Queen.” The false cause is evidenced when the astrologer attributes this second marriage to the combination of name and date, rather than merely to the Queen’s favor of her.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, James goes on to note that the explanations given by astrologers are “shallow, not worthy of close attention,” meaning that they arbitrarily draw lines as to where astrology should be applied without providing reasons for doing so, even after the fact.<sup>31</sup>

Thirdly, writes James, even when interesting results in favour of astrology *are* presented, there is no attempt by the astrological community to expand upon them.<sup>32</sup> Here, he references Michael Gauquelin’s article “Spheres of Influence,” wherein Gauquelin finds an actual correlation between the types of vocations chosen by people born at certain times in the astrological calendar.<sup>33</sup> Instead of taking this substantial point and investigating it, the astrological community closes the book and says “Astrology works; QED.”<sup>34</sup> No time is taken to explore this correlation and, instead, the mere fact that there *is* any link at all is taken to prove a nebulous “something.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pg. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pg. 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pg. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gauquelin, Michael, “Spheres of Influence,” Grim, pg. 33.

<sup>34</sup> Grim, Patrick, *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, pg. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

In describing the fourth and final error, James writes that astrology seeks to fill in *too much*, in that it wants to offer specific pieces of advice in specific situations.<sup>36</sup> Astrology has decided to claim that all coincidence must be a product of something more meaningful, more fully explanatory, and that if we don't see that, we are not looking hard enough.<sup>37</sup> But James explains that what is actually shown by coincidences is recognition that we cannot explain everything, that sometimes things just happen.

Exploring these four errors allows us the opportunity to investigate and address each system of occult explanation, according to James, even though it means wading through things that we know to be patently ridiculous. These are the demands of rationality, and we must seek to meet them as fully as possible. In applying these criteria to astrology, however, we find that astrology does not meet them; in fact it commits all four errors, and so is disqualified from the realm of rationality.<sup>38</sup> Rationality, according to James, must be learned and practiced, and is not a matter of something you “just know.” As such we must be careful about that which seems rational, lest we allow into the discourse something which could cause us to seriously err in its application.

## 2. *Glymour and Stalker*

“The Problem of Demarcation,” asks the question of where we draw the line between scientific and pseudoscientific endeavours. In “Winning through Pseudoscience” (1982), Clark Glymour and Douglas Stalker lay the “demarcation problem” out as resting at the line of rigorousness, by which they mean that whatever is non-rigorous, is generalizing, or seeks overly-hard to explain flimsy premises necessarily counts as pseudoscience. Conversely, whatever *does*

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pg. 30.

take the evidence at hand and investigate it seeking the best explanation, rather than the other way around, is science.<sup>39</sup> Glymour and Stalker provide a list of six principles that characterize pseudosciences, which we will discuss at length: 1) “A coincidence in the hand is worth two in the bush;” 2) “A purpose to everything and everything to its purpose;” 3) “The taller the story, the harder it falls;” 4) “Even physics isn’t all that precise;” 5) “Science is numbers and gauges;” and 6) “Saying no to nit-pickers.”<sup>40</sup>

The catchy sayings used by Glymour and Stalker to describe their understandings of pseudoscientific thesis generation are actually rather thoughtful critiques of what they see as the problem of pseudoscientific explanatory systems. The first principle, “A coincidence in the hand is worth two in the bush,” refers to the idea that any coincidental happening can be used to make a pseudoscientific system seem more legitimate.<sup>41</sup> This is done, according to Glymour and Stalker, by taking whatever correlations you wish to make and finding the coincidental situations in which they both occur. If the pseudoscientist cannot find a pre-existing coincidental relationship, he can then create one, using any common state of affairs; that is to say, by taking some fact about the world, right now, and tracing far enough back in history, that fact becomes a vast improbability, indicative of some grander meaning. “After all, what was the chance, eight million years ago, that the universe would evolve so that you are wearing green socks, today?”<sup>42</sup>

The title of the second principle, “A purpose to everything, and everything to its purpose,” simply means that the pseudoscientist now must explain the facts that arise from the work done with the first principle. Now that the pseudoscientist has found (or manufactured) the coincidences necessary to get people thinking about the world in the correct way, he can show

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pg. 75-86.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pg. 76-77.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pg. 76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

that these coincidences are now and have always been to the benefit of a grand cosmic design, one that takes into account and cares for every individual.<sup>43</sup> He must connect each coincidence to a purpose (“green socks signify great things,” as Glymour and Stalker write), but he must be careful about how he chooses that purpose; to make sure that he chooses well, he should turn to the third principle.<sup>44</sup>

When Glymour and Stalker put forth “The taller the story, the harder it falls,” they mean that an “aspiring” pseudoscientist will seek to create as wild a story as possible, not least because that’s precisely what every other pseudoscientist seems to do, but also because it creates a larger sphere of material with which to work.<sup>45</sup> If no one can disprove your claims as to the reasons that the universe is ordered as it is, then no one can say that you are wrong, or that your explanations are wrong.

The fourth principle, “Even physics isn’t all that precise,” is a basic appeal to the ignorance of the general populace. The pseudoscientist here relies on the claim that no one truly and fully understands the laws or nature of the universe and that, because of this, who can really say that the pseudoscientific explanation is not the correct one?<sup>46</sup>

If the pseudoscientist employs the fifth principle, however (“Science is numbers and gauges”), the majority of people will be more inclined to give credence to the pseudoscientist, as his system will be filled with official-sounding calculations that are still simple enough for anyone to perform.<sup>47</sup> These calculations will most likely rely on some contraption as well as a few simple mathematical operations, which will allow every user to really take a hands-on approach to confirming the system. It seems that the more involved people can be with

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pg. 77.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

understanding and finding (not steering, but *finding*) the path of their destiny, the more likely they are to believe what the system tells them.

The final principle of pseudoscientific system generation is “Saying no to nit-pickers.” This rule is for taking care of the inevitable criticism that will accumulate around the newly created pseudoscience, such as offered counter-examples, attacks on the vagueness of the system’s claims, or a lack of evidence.<sup>48</sup> This principle is composed of five tactics for responding to these criticisms, including continually making distinctions and telling the person who finds fault that they do not understand; referring to coincidental explanations when asked for evidence; quoting well-known aphorisms (Glymour and Stalker use Emerson’s “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”); discussing the philosophical nature of things like the line between theory and practice and the necessity of belief to understand; and finally counterattacking and claiming that much as other greats throughout history have been maligned and misunderstood, so too is the pseudoscientist.<sup>49</sup> These final tactics, when combined with the six preceding principles, will give the pseudoscientist an unassailable position from which to build and operate the system.

These principles are designed to show that pseudosciences are built of nothing but sham assertions and illogic, and Glymour and Stalker go on to build their own halfway-plausible mock pseudoscientific systems out of them, taking great care to make the component contents as meaningless as possible. There is not space to explore their fictional systems here, but it is worth an independent read for anyone who is interested in the ways that people build meaning and find patterns in things that may not necessarily contain them.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pg. 77-78.

## C. The Occult as Unnatural

### 1. *Flew on Causation*

In Anthony Flew's 1980 article, "Parapsychology: Science or Pseudoscience?", he claims that occult phenomena—embodied in this instance by parapsychology, the study of abilities such as ESP or precognition—are untenable because they are simply not at all what they claim to be. Flew assesses the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal, noting from the beginning that he wishes to distinguish parapsychology from the myriad other phenomena under their purview, such as UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle, and astrology. He claims that parapsychology is different because, unlike the rest of the studies where "we either know from the beginning that it is all bunkum, or else we come to know this very soon after serious and honest investigation has begun," parapsychology has been investigated and studied by scientifically rigorous people, with sound methodology, and no agenda.<sup>50</sup> In addition to the fact that he does not believe it to be a new source of knowledge, there are three major distinguishing points of parapsychology. For Flew: 1) it "has to be defined negatively;" 2) there is no way to repeatably demonstrate the data supposedly under investigation; and 3) none of the parapsychological theories are plausible in their explanations of the supposed phenomena.<sup>51</sup>

Flew begins the investigation of the first point by noting that parapsychologists have divided the field of psychic phenomena into two categories called psi-gamma and psi-kappa.<sup>52</sup> Psi-gamma is of the class of psychic phenomena that is represented by clairvoyance ("clear seeing") and telepathy ("distant feeling"), while psi-kappa is exemplified by psychokinesis ("mind movement").<sup>53</sup> He continues to define certain terms and concepts, saying that doing so

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pg. 178.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pg. 179-180.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pg. 180.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



will allow the investigator to recognize that psi-gamma is nothing new. Flew's first order of business is to say that ESP is a meaningless term; there cannot be any such thing as an "extra-sensory perception." The very term is a hopeless contradiction.<sup>54</sup> Perception, Flew writes, is necessarily mediated by the senses and so to say that a perception is "extra"—that is to say "outside of" or "beyond" the senses—is to either confuse or misapply one or more of the terms involved.<sup>55</sup> If parapsychology wishes to insist on this contradiction, writes Flew, then it is "perverse to insist upon thinking of psi-gamma in terms of a perceptual model. It is almost equally perverse to think of such information as constituting a kind of knowledge."<sup>56</sup> Why would we consider information not gained by the senses to be knowledge, when apprehension and experience via *some* sensation is the only way we have of understanding the outside world?

We have just seen what psi-gamma claims *not* to be, according to Flew, i.e. it is not a new kind of knowledge, it is not obtained by the senses, and it cannot be extrapolated from knowledge of previous states of affairs.<sup>57</sup> Next we must turn to the second problem that Flew has with parapsychology: "A phenomenon is, by definition, paranormal if and only if it contravenes some fundamental and well-founded assumption of science."<sup>58</sup> Even if psi-gamma phenomena do exist as somehow "extra-sensory," we can only investigate their correspondence with the rest of the world, and in fact to their supposedly foreknown situations, by means *of the senses*.<sup>59</sup> This means that parapsychology, whatever else it might be, is not at all an independent source of knowledge and understanding of the world and is instead merely an extension of existing knowledge-gathering mechanisms. In addition to and in conjunction with this, when using the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pg. 181.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pg. 182; Flew note 13.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

current methods of parapsychological testing, we have no way of determining which results are due to ESP or clairvoyance and which are attributable to random chance.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, though Flew makes it clear that he is concerned primarily with psi-gamma, he uses the claims of psi-kappa phenomena (psychokinetic ability) to show that theories concerning parapsychological phenomena are severely lacking. If psi-kappa phenomena were testable, says Flew, then they would be testable in ways that would not allow for confusion between the results, as in psi-gamma phenomena; all that would be needed are extremely sensitive measuring devices in a shielded environment.<sup>61</sup> From here, he goes on to compare the preceding three points to Hume's criteria for miracles, saying that the impossibility of *proving* that miracles have occurred is extremely similar to that of the reproduction of parapsychological results.<sup>62</sup> Hume's criteria state that for a miracle to *be* a miracle it must be a violation of the laws of nature by the divine; thus, because the natural world has been repeatedly confirmed by experience, we have no reason to accept any possible violation of it, nor could we prove it if we did. The fact that the event *happened* means that it is consistent with nature.<sup>63</sup> But perhaps more important than any of the foregoing points, Flew writes that parapsychological phenomena are unnatural because they allegedly violate the laws of causation.<sup>64</sup> Standard causation dictates that an effect cannot precede its cause, which is the fundamental assumption of extra-sensory perception.

These objections are of the sorts that drive against the idea of the occult, or magic being natural phenomena, derived from the natural world. They can be seen within the same vein as Popper's argument on falsifiability, since all use the tools of rationality to discuss and defend naturalness in the world. I would question these objections, however, asking if the case can't be

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, pg. 184.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pg. 184-185; Cf. the research done by the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pg. 185-189.

<sup>63</sup> Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, pg. 86-92, 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Grim, Patrick, *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, pg. 191-192.

made that there is a rational, as well as a natural, way of arranging and describing the world that is not necessarily scientific but is internally coherent. This question will be the focus of the rest of this essay.

#### **D. Conceptual Bleed-Over**

As I earlier noted and as we have now come to understand, there is necessarily some bleed over between the concepts of the natural and the rational as presented by the preceding authors. It is generally assumed that that which is natural may be investigated by rational, scientific means, and that that which is rational will have some foundation in the natural world. That being said, we have also come to be aware of the possibility that Popper's definition of science as that which can be tested, refuted, and falsified does not cover all that may be investigated by rational means. In the coming chapters, we will explore other means of rational consideration than the purely scientific, and we will use them to make a case for a redefinition of the concept of "natural."

### *III. Support for the Idea of Magical Phenomena as Natural and Rational*

#### **A. “Natural” and “Rational”**

In this chapter, I will discuss support for the category of magic by means of the separate but interrelated categories of natural and rational. What is “Natural?” What is “Rational?” In our investigation thus far, we have not reached any clear definition of the term “natural,” though it has been used implicitly to refer to that which is scientifically observable and testable. We have said, in effect, that if something does not fit with the currently established laws of science, if it is not logical, repeatable and testable, then it is not natural. In regards to “rational,” we have seen internal consistency, repeatability, and correlation of a system’s results with the observable world as the tests to be met. In this chapter, we will investigate four authors whose works most clearly challenge these assumptions about the requirements for “naturalness” and “rationality”—from whose writings can be seen emerging a new understanding of these ideas—and we will seek to understand these authors’ arguments for their positions.

#### **B. Magic as Natural**

##### *1. Faivre and the Theosophists*

In his *Access to Western Esotericism*, Antoine Faivre describes the rise of the term *magia naturalis* and its connection with the scientific method. According to Faivre, magic and science both try to describe and explain the world in terms that allow those observing it to predict and control its future behaviour. This is because magic and science were intrinsically connected in the European Renaissance mind; they were seen as states through which man must pass, or types of knowledge he must have in order to achieve salvation. More accurately, both science and

magic were tools available to regain the state of perfection man had prior to “the Fall.”<sup>65</sup> Faivre believes that magic is exemplified by “correspondences” between “all visible things and which likewise unite the latter with invisible entities.”<sup>66</sup> This means that there is an “alikehood” among things in nature which is unaccounted for by science, except to say that *it is the way it is*. Faivre also mentions the modernizing of the contemporary esoteric movement, writing that those currently involved in the study of esoterics are more willing to embrace modernity and the fields of natural science.<sup>67</sup> This means that they will be more likely to approach the data and experiments in ways that fit with science and with science’s definition of “natural.”

Faivre describes several different “paths” of inquiry on which the practitioner may travel and designates this modernizing trend as belonging to the “Humanist Path.” The traveller along this path seeks to understand the esoteric through what it means and symbolizes in relation to the human psychology, and through investigation by human means (e.g. the sciences).<sup>68</sup> This would seem to place Faivre squarely in the realm of the Jungian psychologist (Jung’s tenets consisting of the interpretation of symbols and the application of that interpretation to the context of the patient), but he denies this when he writes that there is a need to distinguish the esotericist’s call to investigate archetypes from that of the anthropologist or the psychologist, effectively arguing *against* the reducing of esotericism to other fields.<sup>69</sup> But Faivre is obviously finding use for the terms of these other fields in his explication, and he goes on to speak of the Jungian Collective Unconscious.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Faivre, Antoine, *Access to Western Esotericism*, pg. 11-12, 1994.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 34.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, pg.41.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, pg. 78, 1960.

As has been previously mentioned, Faivre spends some time discussing the tendency of those individuals or groups of individuals on the humanist path of esotericism to accept and incorporate modernity into their investigations.<sup>71</sup> Faivre discusses this as part of his methodology of the occult and esoterics (the study of the “hidden” or “internal” paths), specifically concerning the hermeneutics of this field of study. He writes that contemporary esotericists are using the tools of the modern sciences to understand esoterics, prompting a return to the *Naturphilosophie* of the theosophical societies.<sup>72</sup> That is to say that they are seeking a means of showing the connection of nature, science, and the occult, or “magical,” similar to that of the theosophists. “They are aware,” he writes, “that modernity is not free from danger, but they do not consider that danger inevitable.”<sup>73</sup> This is an important distinction, because there have been many who have considered the use of scientific tools to study the nature of magic, or vice-versa, to be an act of unwarranted conflation; i.e. that those who would use both sets of tools are trying to say that magic and science are interchangeable.

Though Faivre never names it as his referent, the idea of correspondence between certain parts of the gross physical world (as well as parts of the hidden world) is an idea that is also seen in the work of Sir James George Frazer in his seminal work *The Golden Bough*. Faivre does note, however, that he sees the investigators on the humanist path as moving further along the natural progression of Jung’s ideas of the collective unconscious, using the incorporation of the natural sciences to “[confer] upon it a . . . dimension . . . of a transconsciousness branching out upon an imaginal world.”<sup>74</sup> Both of these ideas will be discussed at length later in this essay.

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<sup>71</sup> Faivre, Antoine, *Access to Western Esotericism*, pg. 41.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

## 2. *Glucklich and Phenomenology*

In his book *The End of Magic*, Ariel Glucklich claims of the magical practices in Banaras, India that not only do most believers in magic *not* consider their practices and beliefs to be supernatural, but that the *term* “supernatural” can be considered meaningless.<sup>75</sup> Glucklich states that most practitioners in Banares consider things like ghosts to be on a continuum with the physical state of life, and that the scientific system has merely not come up with the means of expressing their existence as yet.<sup>76</sup> They believe in magical practices, in the same way that you believe in turning the key in your ignition to start your car: you are aware that there are steps and intervening stages between what you do and what happens, but, for all intents and purposes, they are one relationship: You turn the key, and your car starts; you perform the ritual and the effect happens.<sup>77</sup>

The above comparison is drawn in a purely phenomenological framework, looking at what magic is, what it does, and what it means to *those who practice it*. Once understood, I believe that this phenomenological mode can be applied to all human endeavours, describing them as attempts to understand and engage the world in which we live as we find it represented to us. This does not necessarily mean that all human endeavours are to be *solely* described in this fashion; rather that this is one of *many* ways that human behaviour can be understood. Glucklich takes the time to investigate the many academic approaches to magic over the years, and makes it clear that he is taking Jung’s tactic—at least in part—in the investigation of magic. Jung refused to “explain magic away.”<sup>78</sup> Whereas Freud sought to reduce magical experiences down to explainable phenomena, or psychological traits, Jung simply approached said experiences on

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<sup>75</sup> Glucklich, Ariel, *The End of Magic*, pg. 11-13, 1997.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 11.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 55-56.

their own terms and sought to understand them within their contexts. Glucklich notes that, through a recontextualization of magic, the field of “cultural anthropology” has begun to see magic as a kind of language, a system of symbols to be interpreted, rather than as something to be verified or falsified.<sup>79</sup>

Glucklich investigates the progress of new scientific trends, including one called psychoneuroimmunology, an area of behavioural medicine that “studies the effect of mental factors on health and disease.”<sup>80</sup> In this field, research is done regarding the idea that the mind can influence the immune system by means of the neural interactions in the brain. According to Glucklich, the work that has been done shows that the immune system clearly responds to the biochemical messengers of the brain, which in turn have been shown to be able to be stimulated by the mental activity of the individual, depending on her emotional or psychological states.<sup>81</sup> This being the case, it is no surprise that it has taken a while for this kind of thought to catch on in the medical community. Glucklich believes that the studies and results are pertinent to much older practices, magical rituals that require the subject to adopt a proper mindset so that she may combat the disease or ailment.<sup>82</sup> While it is a fact of evolutionary biology that animals will naturally heal from most ailments, it is also true that there can be a correlation between reduced healing *times* and the mindset of the individual.

Glucklich makes it plain that the clear-cut notions of causations dictated by the scientific Enlightenment have become less concrete and more adaptable in the past century, beginning with the work of James Clerk Maxwell and his investigation into the behaviour of

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, pg. 59.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pg. 68.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, pg. 68-69.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, pg. 69.



electromagnetism.<sup>83</sup> These discoveries and theories cast a great deal of doubt upon the ideals of Newtonian physics and their laws of certainty in motion and measurement. Now there was a understanding of the universe that included probability and minute causal fluctuations and, later, a built-in element of uncertainty, such that though we could know and measure one thing, it would necessarily mean that we could not know or measure another.<sup>84</sup> In this way, quantum mechanics came onto the scene, and became the new science of the day, by which many things were explained. Glucklich's question, however, becomes is magic thereby merely explained, or is it explained *away*?<sup>85</sup>

Glucklich next looks at a case study regarding magical or occult phenomena of bi-location and dematerialization, which have been explained as being a function of a different kind of ordering of the universe—a division into “implicate” and “explicate” orders, as presented by David Bohm.<sup>86</sup> The “implicate” order is defined as one in which the universe and all of its parts are in contact and interaction with each other; in essence the implicate order holds that, when the universe as a whole performs an operation on a larger scale, the effects of that operation appear concurrently, but are not necessarily connected.<sup>87</sup> This is a contextual view of the operation of the universe, resting on two types of understanding, but it is still not a complete understanding, according to Glucklich. His point in studying the people of Banaras and coming to understand their magical practices is to show that magic viewed from a phenomenological perspective affords a much more complete and useful understanding than other perspectives which may be more concerned with verification or testability.<sup>88</sup> Any object, writes Glucklich, can become a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, pg. 72.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, pg. 73.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, pg. 65.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, pg. 74-75.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, pg. 233.

magical item, a talisman, or a sacred object. The key is not the object itself, but rather what that object *does* and the context of meaning for the people for whom it does it. This pragmatic, phenomenological view is not new; it has its deepest roots in the work of James Frazer and that of Carl Jung. Their work with magic and the occult is concerned, primarily, with its rational integration and understanding.

### **C. Magic as Rational**

#### *1. Frazer and the Principles of Sympathy and Contagion*

In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer writes that magic is an attempt to do the work of science, but in a manner that seeks to override the generally perceived natural order.<sup>89</sup> Magic, according to Frazer's investigations, works on two principles: the principle of sympathy, wherein an object B that is like an object A can affect object A; and the principle of contagion, wherein an object B that has touched or previously been connected to an object A can affect object A.<sup>90</sup> From these two principles, Frazer believes that we can extrapolate all magical practice, and see it as an attempt to influence the causal universe. For example, a rain ceremony, in which participants drink water collected at the last rain and spit it onto the ground, would be magically effective because the rain water being spat upon the ground is like the rain in that it both is water and is falling to the ground, and it has been in *contact* with the thing the participants are trying to affect, namely the sky and the rain clouds. These actions, combined with the correct words and phrases at the correct times, will give rise to the desired result: a rain storm.<sup>91</sup>

As noted above, the work done by the principles of contagion and sympathy are such that the magician can seek to affect any area of the natural world. A rain dance and the ritual spilling

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<sup>89</sup> Frazer, Sir James George, *The Golden Bough*, pg.12 -56, 1996 Touchstone Edition.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, pg. 72-89; See also Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, 1957.

of water are used to effect a rain storm; the combination of personal items and a simulacrum of a particular individual are used to affect that individual, for good or ill; the growing of crops are used as parts of rituals to promote human fertility; all of these things are able to be done by means of sympathy and contagion. The state of the macrocosmic universe can affect the microcosmic or human, and vice versa; this is exemplified in the principle “As above, so below.”<sup>92</sup> What a magician does on the level of human interaction can, by dint of similarity in structure and connection in type, affect the large-scale universe, and the form and movements of the universe can, obviously, affect humanity. Though this is not what is normally considered to be a scientifically quantifiable interaction, it can obviously be interpreted as a form of cause and effect that *can* be correlated. Frazer’s system of inquiry took these into account and he argued that the basis of all magic was an attempt to control these avenues of cause and effect, while religion seeks only to fit into it.<sup>93</sup>

Concerned with the magical practices of various tribes and cultures, Frazer relates each practice for operations such as controlling rain, the sun, wind, and other forces of nature.<sup>94</sup> The principles discussed here are specific to each culture Frazer investigates, indicative of the meanings and symbols that the group associates with each aspect of the weather. For some cultures, the rain may be symbolized by a snake in an arc, or by the blood of a bull hitting the ground, depending on the symbolic meaning of those things in their cultural contexts. When taken together, at the right places and times—which are also dictated by the sacredness of those things to that particular people—the belief is that the rain will come. If the rain does not come, then something must have been done wrong. In making use of a system of operation and description, all that we can do is to attempt to predict and control results, and make adjustments

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<sup>92</sup> See *The Kybalion* (1912); the works of Aleister Crowley (1889-1989); and the writings of Hermes Trismegistus.

<sup>93</sup> Frazer, pg. 12-69.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 69-96.

in our operations if it fails. Though this analogy is an imperfect one, as we explore Carl Jung, we will better understand that the levels of symbolism considered in religion and magic can take the concepts of sympathy and contagion from a purely physical to a more symbolic and conceptual one. We will also see that the new understandings of symbolism can contribute to making the aforementioned predictions and adjustments as pertinent for the system of magic as it is for science.

## 2. Jung and Pragmatism

In his 1938 *Psychology and Religion*, Jung says that the psychological value of religious or magical experience rests not in its being true or false and not in its *determining* the nature of the world for us, but in the work that it does in allowing us to function within society:

It is true that an overwhelming majority of educated people are fragmentary personalities and have a lot of substitutes instead of the genuine goods.... What is usually and generally called "religion" is... a substitute.... The substitution has the obvious purpose of replacing immediate experience by a choice of suitable symbols invested in a solidly organized dogma and ritual.<sup>95</sup>

This means that we are not searching for truth or belief in religious or magical occurrences, rather that we have to accept and appreciate the experience for what it is, regardless of the truth value of the experience. Jung's goal is the understanding that direct experience of reality is not only unlikely, but potentially dangerous if attained. With direct experience, says Jung, we have no reference point, no way to orient ourselves so that we may operate within the constructed society, the *collective reality* around us. Without this orientation we are adrift and constantly searching for something to adjust and complete us; this disorientation, according to Jung, is the source of detrimental neuroses.

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<sup>95</sup> Jung, 1938, pg. 52.

According to Jung, to be a part of a religious tradition in a conscious capacity is to take control of the application and adjustment of the drives toward individual integration into society, in that one must recognize and mindfully seek to attain what is considered a “normal” functioning of the psyche. That is to say that the act of becoming engaged in religious practices is an act of consciously seeking to mediate one’s experiences and correctly fit with their society. The unconscious stifling of these drives—which are used to fill the apparent deficits in a personality—leads to the development of neurotic behaviour, because “if [an inferiority] is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected. It is, moreover, liable to burst forth in a moment of unawareness.”<sup>96</sup> If this happens often, then it is obvious that the persons suffering these unwanted and erratic drives to seek completion will not be able to adapt to and function in the world around them. If they cannot function in the world, then they are, in point of fact, abnormal. Elsewhere, Jung makes it clear that the term “abnormal” is not a normative distinction, that is to say, it is not a description designed to make a value judgment on an individual.<sup>97</sup> Rather, “abnormal” simply means that which does not conform to the standard and accepted rules of society. As such, something abnormal may be said to be “bad,” only within the context of that secondary judgment.

We see that Jung’s conception of religious and magical phenomena is a pragmatic and phenomenological one. It is not concerned with truth values or beliefs and is, instead, a question of the experience of the believer or practitioner. As such we must ask, “what is the function of this belief or practice” rather than “is this belief or practice true?” According to Jung, it is meaningless to ask about the truth of an experience (as well as being outside the purview of psychology), because an experience is neither true nor false; it simply *is the experience*. If this is

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, pg. 93.

<sup>97</sup> Jung, *Psychology and the Occult*, pg. 4, 1978.

the case, then the correct course of action is to seek to interpret the experience and to integrate that experience into a normal societal functioning. We need not attempt to make a judgment about someone who sees ghosts, or who has the experience of “feeling the Holy Spirit,” because that judgment is without substance; it is secondary to the question of what those experiences *mean* to that person, and what work they do in that person’s life. This new perspective is a part of the process of recapitulation of the definitions of “natural” and “rational.”

This pragmatic reading of Jung allows the case for magical practices, experiences, and descriptions to be made from another angle: If all experiences are filters through which we interact with the world and the socially accepted rules therein, and if all of the experiences are valid *as* experiences varying only in the degree to which we are able to adapt to and to find meaning in the world through them, then magical experiences and descriptions of reality are merely another view on the world, another system through which we can investigate reality. If we can use magical experiences and descriptions in ways that allow us to continue to interact with the world around us, then their usefulness is what matters. In magic, science, psychology, and many other disciplines, we are using an artificially created lexicon to describe and interact with the world around us, with nature. If there is a means of translation between the systems, while keeping in mind the over-arching goal of each system, then conversations can be had and investigations can be made between those systems and into the natural world. But what of the idea that the description, itself, is the problem; what if magic as a system does not conform to the socially constructed rules?

If we restrict the *means* of description or investigation, saying that one system is more or less valid than another, while not taking into account the idea that each system may have different applications, then we have missed a crucial point in Jung’s method. On Jung’s account,

it is not a matter of there being rules to which we conform; it doesn't matter the means by which we become "normal," just so long as those means achieve the end goal of normalcy. To make "illegal" any of the means of dealing with the search for meaning and purpose, the integration of self into the society, or the fundamental processes for healthily dealing with neuroses misses this entirely. For Jung, a practice, experience, or belief is to be utilized for as long as it continues to allow one to integrate into the society in which one finds oneself, and it is to be discarded as soon as it ceases to do that work. As he says at the end of *Psychology and Religion*:

I must point out that there is no question of belief, but of experience. Religious experience is absolute.... You can only say that you have never had such an experience, and your opponent will say: "Sorry, I have." And there your discussion will come to an end. No matter what the world thinks about religious experience, the one who has it possesses the great treasure of a thing that has provided him with a source of life, meaning and beauty....<sup>98</sup>

And so an experience—be it religious, magical, occult, or otherwise—is neither true nor false; it simply is.

#### **D. Rational and Natural**

If an experience can only be categorized in relation to the prevalent experiences of those *doing* the experiencing, then no experience is rational. Instead what is rational is the act of categorization, and only that insofar as it is an act of trying to fit the understanding of the experience within the culturally accepted norms. In other words, categorizing is an act of rationalization. If we self-consciously approach the systematization of experience, making sure to maintain consistency throughout, then any such system may be shown to be rational within its own context and limitations. Similarly, if "naturalness" concerns that which we can fit within our understanding of the "natural world" and that which may have a place within the chain of cause

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<sup>98</sup> Jung, 1938, pg. 113.

and effect, then it can thus be seen that a continuum of ideas and actions may all be placed under the heading of “natural.”

If we take the positions of Faivre, Glucklich, Frazer and Jung and explore the places where their investigations overlap, then a picture begins to emerge for a different understanding of magic and other “occult” phenomena or beliefs which may be used as a response to the criticisms of James, Kuhn, Popper, Glymour, Stalker, and Flew. This understanding presents magic as having all of the components of rationality and naturalness to make for an explanatory system with specific lessons to be learned. In the next chapter, I will argue more fully for this understanding, expanding on the materials and positions we have considered thus far.



#### *IV. Argument for Viewing Magic as Natural and Rational*

##### **A. What is the Argument for Magic?**

Thus far we have described the issues and challenges facing the investigation of magic in a academic context, not the least of which are the demand that it conform to the methods of scientific investigation. We can now see that this view, in one important sense, begs the question by assuming the supremacy of the scientific method. Science, like magic, psychology, or philosophy, can be characterized as a system by which we seek to explain the nature of the reality that we have around us. The supremacy of science is not guaranteed purely by its consistency of result because, if we can qualify or quantify the informational inputs necessary to use a system and determine results, we can get consistent outputs from any system. One problem for our current time is that there is a reluctance to qualify or quantify the input variables necessary to make these distinctions and determinations, precisely *because* they do not conform to the requirements of objectively verifiable scientific process. The impact of belief on a system is something that cannot be determined until we have a qualification for types of belief—group belief, variance in individual belief, and so on—in terms of psychological constructs and symbol systems. These may be shared across groups either consciously or unconsciously (as in the case of Jung’s collective unconscious), but they will be understood in vastly different ways.

In order to have a clearer conception of the levels of interaction between the individual and the world, the “subject” and the “object,” we must have a system that allows us to take as many variables into account as possible, so that we may then correlate those variables with their results. I believe that we take a step toward this type of system in what is traditionally called magic. In magical systems, practices, and descriptions, we are concerned with form, function, time, place, the state of the natural world in relation to the individual, the psychological structure

of the individual and any of a number of groups to which they belong, and the experiences that follow there from. In a Jungian sense, there is nothing “supernatural” about magical practices or experiences, as they follow from the strictures of a system of description concerned with the entire scope of the natural world.

## **B. Types of Experience**

In Jung’s collective unconscious, there is no ownership of the symbols and archetypes available to the individual. In fact, by their very nature the symbols in the collective unconscious are a reflexive combination of the symbols in the unconscious of all human beings. What this means is that in the “collective unconscious” there are symbols and archetypes of meaning—the tragic Hero, for example—that these are interpreted by every individual who encounters them, and that their interpretation is put back out into the world, to be interpreted and understood by those who encounter it, and on and on.<sup>99</sup> The individual has *access* to the collective unconscious, not *ownership* of any part of it. When an individual accesses a store of collected knowledge and understanding, she maps what she finds onto a correlative symbol or structure in her conscious or unconscious mind. This is then modified by the experience of input, depending on time, place, group, weather conditions, internal hormonal conditions, and any number of other factors of the individual experiencer.

Here we see the nature of the interaction between the collective and individual stores of knowledge, and how they influence and effect change within each other. That someone has experienced something can not be disputed, as this is the purest form of private knowledge. The actual *experience* is a thing that happens only to an individual and no matter how many people claim to have an analogous experience, it will never be the *same* experience, nor can any other

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<sup>99</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav, *Four Archetypes: Mother/Rebirth/Spirit/Trickster* pg. 3-4; eleventh printing, 1992.

person truly be said to “*know*” that the other person knows.<sup>100</sup> To that end, we have no choice but to believe that the reportage of the individual truly reflects their actual experience and, from that point, we may seek to make sure that said experience does not prevent them from interacting with the rest of the world. If the experience *is* detrimental, however, then we must seek to fix whatever problems it causes. Does it then make more sense to try to cure a person’s problems with ghosts by convincing that person that ghosts don’t exist, or by finding the symbols and system that are known, within the context in which the individual is situated, to eradicate or otherwise remove ghosts? If we address the problem in the *context* of the problem, Jung says, we will achieve much more thorough and lasting results than if we try to deny the validity of the context.<sup>101</sup>

If we can systematize the nature and requirements of the experiences or private knowledge of the experiencer, then she can better integrate her private knowledge with the collected understanding of the public knowledge. This means that we must catalog the circumstances of these magical experiences or phenomena and address their initial correlation before we can test a system of causes and experiential effects. In other words, we must be willing to investigate these phenomena on their own terms before we can develop a system that explains them. Simply denying the efficacy of the system and claiming that it is an invalid representation of the world presupposes the validity of the system used to judge. We cannot make *judgments* across systems of understanding and description, but we can make comparisons of consistency and usefulness of description. With that in mind, we must accept that there may not always be an exact mapping of description across systems, and there will necessarily be things that are more completely explained in one system than another. Again we come to the question of the

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, pg. 25-31, 2000.

<sup>101</sup> Jung, *Psychology and the Occult*, “On the Psychology of So-Called Occult Phenomena,” (1902), pg. 6-91, 2<sup>nd</sup> Printing 1981.

preference for one system of explanation, one way or organizing our experience of the universe, over another.

As has been noted, where we are concerned with science, we are most often concerned with shared, public knowledge, and the methods of science are such that we achieve corroborated measurements and correlations most often. But is this necessarily the case? Is it true, by nature of the scientific method itself, that it will yield the best results of public knowledge most often? Or is it only the case that once we have determined a definition, a direction in the search for knowledge, we will more often than not privilege the information that corroborates it? The “open source” nature of science, the very public nature of the public knowledge, allows for continual investigation and corroboration that has been seen to lead to what Tim van Gelder has called “confirmation bias.”<sup>102</sup> This is the tendency to seek corroboration only in support or confirmation of one’s preconceptions, rather than in that which would disprove or challenge them. Thomas Goetz has argued that the expectations of researchers have influenced publication results for many years; results which may later be found to be outlying instances get published because they are the *expected* results, not because they are the correct results.<sup>103</sup> These results then get a great deal of attention, and all subsequent investigators are geared toward finding evidence that corroborates and correlates what has already been shown.

Confirmation bias is a subtle thing in most experimentation, as researchers are trained to watch themselves for it. In the case of things like magic and other so-called “occult” phenomena and systems, we see that the confirmation bias is not simply found *within* a particular system, but on a meta-level, when we seek to judge the worth or usefulness of an entire system. It is perhaps best understood that there is no truly objective point from which we may judge the efficacy of a

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<sup>102</sup> See van Gelder, Tim (1960); Westen, Drew (2006); Shermer, Michael (2006).

<sup>103</sup> Goetz, Thomas; Article, “Freeing the Dark Data of Failed Scientific Experiments,” *Wired Magazine* issue 15.10, September 25, 2007.

system, as we always engage in judging things from a position of a personal interpretation and understanding of whatever we have accessed from the collective public knowledge. We can become, at best, better aware of this process, but we cannot at any point escape it; no one learns of or understands the world in a vacuum. At this point, we must accept that what we have in terms of “objective knowledge” or judgment is necessarily infused with an individual, “subjective” interpretation of the world, and that this is not necessarily a detrimental thing. Both perspectives and sources of information are drawn from experience of the natural world, and are parts of and influences upon each other.

### **C. Magic as a Natural By-Product of the Preceding Systems**

As we have seen, we can look at each descriptive system as whole and inviolate; the only judgment to be passed upon it concerns issues of consistency and correlation. No matter the system to which we subscribe, we will find ourselves in the act of defining the state of nature and experience. Our experiential world is that which we seek to describe and understand, regardless of the instrumentation and definitions used to do so, and as such we are constantly dealing with what is most natural to us. Our definition of natural will determine what we can discuss and in what contexts we are able to operate because context is the true demarcating line in terms of the applicability of a given system. That is to say, if my system is concerned with the context of emotional meaning and interaction, then the concepts I use and their definitions will be very different than those of mathematical descriptions of the world. This is because we are dealing with what is a fundamental difference of concern, and while each system may seek to describe the universe as it is experienced, the key context of each will be determined by the experience and the preference of the person or persons generating it. This does not mean that we are unable

to access contexts or systems other than our own, but rather that we must recognize that our understanding will differ, because we are different, and that the experiential world is necessarily one of a combination of subjectivity and objectivity. This means that the external expressions of internal states will all be similar, due to having the same outer references, but that they will not be the same, because the internal combinations of those references will result in different associations *between* them references. We must modify our definitions of rationality and naturalness, accordingly.

If we redefine nature as synonymous with “the universe” or “existence,” then everything that exists *in* it exists as a part *of* it. This means that any system that we use to describe existence will, if it is consistent, generate nothing but natural laws, as defined by the experience of the universe filtered through a certain perception and experience. To clarify, the act of describing the experience of existence will be influenced by that very particular experience, and thus every definition will be slightly different if only in its further applications. This does not mean that one definition must necessarily be correct, however, because an experience of a thing is not something that can be modified; rather the *meaning* of the experience can change and can influence future experiences and recollections of past ones, though never changing what something was and meant *at that time*. If this is the case, then for anything to be “supernatural” only makes it part of a larger nature, a particular interpretation and perceived meaning of a specific definition of which the universe is, itself, a part. It is a shift in contextual understanding rather than in objective “meaning” that we experience in the “supernatural” or the “occult.” This means that the phenomenon in question—magic, in this case—is not supernatural, at all; it is merely indicative of a more complex nature than previously understood. In using the descriptive system of magic, we are making an attempt to describe our context in relation to the wider

context of the universe and to describe that universal context in relation to context of existence. The meaning of “universe,” then, comes to include ever-widening contexts, or perhaps contexts that are simply differently related.

One contextual system need not encapsulate the same experiences and descriptions as all others, because some of those experiences may quite literally be unimportant to the functioning of any system. Though a case could (and perhaps *should*) be made for the generation of a contextual system that seeks to constantly expand, or to reclassify and to recontextualize itself, there is not enough time or space to address this issue here. Instead, we must be content to make a case for re-examining the concept and system of magic as one which works within its own context, while seeking to expand and deepen the understanding that magic can afford in regards to the experiential world. If we begin with the assumption that everything that can be explained can be explained by science, then we are not only taking for granted the idea that science is, itself, a reliable tool for investigation, but also that it is a tool that will satisfactorily explain all the phenomena with which it comes in contact. When we look at the scientific method and the means by which it was devised, we see that there are certain assumptions that scientists agree upon as a starting position. They agree that my words and your words for something mean the same thing; that what I see, hear, feel, or smell matches what you see, hear, or smell. Scientists have no guarantee of the truth of these assumptions, however, beyond the shared conceptual experience of designating a term to reference an object and then sharing that reference. The meanings and associations with these references, however, are not and cannot be shared because no two people live the same single life. In magic, the combinations of references are perhaps more nuanced, more subtle, but the goal is the same: Shared references towards shared ends.

A simple but powerful example is that what I see or feel in discussing the sight and texture of a tree may not phenomenologically match up with what you see or feel, but we have shared expressions for them. “Brown,” “rough,” and “round” are concepts devised by human beings to express certain sensations to other human beings, and we must simply assume that what I mean by the terms matches what you mean. This agreement of reference is all that allows us to operate within any shared system and demands that there be continual re-affirmation of agreement with each new term that is introduced. This is what Roger Cooter means when he writes, “all knowledge of external nature is made by men and socially constructed.”<sup>104</sup> In addition to the socially constructed nature of knowledge and arbitrary lines of demarcation, we have the concern that science may not satisfactorily explain everything that its proponents claim it does.

As we have seen, Frazer’s treatment of magical practices is presented from a position of disbelief. He simply seeks to describe the practices of those who do subscribe to magical systems. The general arc of *The Golden Bough* moves from magic to religion to science, seeing the latter as the ultimate manifestation of the description of and interaction with the natural world, and the former two as flawed but understandable stops along the way.<sup>105</sup> While there can be no doubt that a system of magical description or operation will be flawed and unable to encompass or account for the entire spectrum of human experience of the natural world, this criticism is no truer of magical theories than of scientific theories. A great many scientific theories are flawed, requiring constant adjustment and investigation to match the way things work in the “real world,” and yet even though they are neither fully understood (for nothing can yet be said to be “fully understood”) nor fully reliable, we use them daily. The meteorologist

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, Roger Cooter, “The Conservatism of Pseudoscience,” pg. 138.

<sup>105</sup> Frazer, pg. 55, 824-825.



who, based on “objective” data, determines that rain will fall and who subsequently enjoys a week of constant sunshine, does not reject meteorology, on the whole, but merely assumes that he did not have all the relevant information, and needs to perfect his theories and their applications. More than this, science seems singularly inadequate in describing and capturing the meaning of certain complex natural phenomena, such as love, beauty, and philosophy.

If we were to ask a practitioner of a magical system to give up her practice because her input variables did not achieve the desired result, it would be analogous to asking a quantum physicist to stop using quantum physics for the same reason. There are still a number of areas to be investigated in which a magical system can be shown as natural, and one of the most important of these is the area of phenomenological psychology. As we have seen, both Carl Jung and Ariel Glucklich examine the idea of occult as defined through experience, rather than on a basis of whether it is “true” or “false.” The key distinction is that an experience cannot be “true,” it can only be an experience; by definition, it is something that happens to someone, or that someone has. If this is the case, then occult or magical experiences, as a result of operations within occult or magical systems, are not to be judged on criteria of truth or falsity, but on how they enable the experiencer to interact with the world around them.

In his book *I Am a Strange Loop*, Douglas Hofstadter makes a distinction between levels of description being useful for different contexts, and I believe that this can be applied laterally, as well.<sup>106</sup> Though we may look at a purely scientific explanation for a phenomenon and find that there is no lost information, that it can be mechanistically explained in terms of cause, we cannot believe that this extremely narrow explanation will hold the same meaning. A mechanistic explanation is not concerned with what an event “means,” or any potential motivations of or influences on human agents involved. For instance, if we ask why a certain

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<sup>106</sup> Hofstadter, Douglas, *I Am a Strange Loop*, pg. 32-50, 2007.

building caught fire, or why it took so long for the Red Sox to win the World Series, a description of the atomic level interactions that led to those events would not only be astronomically long and tiresome, but it would miss the central point of the question. Obviously the molecules of the materials in the burning building were excited to their frequency of combustion, and the atoms of the players on the various teams of the Red Sox were in such a configuration that they did not meet the condition “win,” but this is not the point. These answers do not satisfy on this level; the questions must be approached on the level at which they were asked. Why did the building catch fire? There was bad electrical wiring. Why did it take so long for the Sox to win the Series? They lacked talent, or the psychological effects of being “cursed” caused them to subtly sabotage themselves every year, or what have you. These are not “purely” scientific explanations, and they do not fully explain all phenomena, but they are the explanations that address the concerns of the question.

Again, the major objections presented in *Philosophy of Science and the Occult* tend to fall into one of two distinct but interrelated categories. The first type—objections to the occult as irrational—we see represented by Edward James, Clark Glymour and Douglas Stalker. The second type—objections to the occult as unnatural—we see represented by Antony Flew, Karl Popper, and J.B. Rhine.<sup>107</sup> (Of course, we have many people falling along some spectrum of agreement and disagreement with all of these figures.) These two types of objections, while distinct, are intertwined in that they both attempt to dismiss occult phenomena on the basis of a set of presuppositions about the world by asking, “Are Occult Phenomena Rational/Scientific?” On investigation, this criticism begs the question, because it *assumes* a rational/scientific explanation for everything.

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<sup>107</sup> Grim, Patrick , pg. 217-227, Rhine’s “Second Report on a Case of Experimenter Fraud,” deals with the dimension of fraud and unnaturalness exemplified by the inability to produce physical evidence.

#### **D. Conceptual Analogies**

Relativity does not reliably address the concerns of quantum mechanics, and psychology does not adequately cover the phenomena of human biology. Literary criticism does not explain chemistry. These systems are different contexts for meaningfully discussing different types of phenomena and for demarcating types of cause and effect, such that we may better apprehend the world. Magic may not be able to be explained in purely scientific terms (though we may find some of the methods of science applicable). This is because it is a system which, though a part of the same human conception of the universe and thus sharing many starting assumptions with science, seeks to address different questions than does science. Magic is a distinct combination of meaning, function, form, and interpretation, and as such it necessarily makes use of aspects of almost all human endeavours (though some might claim that these endeavours grew out of, or at least are concurrent *with*, magic). To ask that the descriptive system of magic conform to purely scientific standards is as if to ask that a psychopharmacologist conform her findings to the rules of sonnet composition.

There is no single context by which all explanations will reliably graft onto all others, but even if there were such a context, then it would seem that scientific evaluations would no longer be falsifiable. On the abstract level, science would have a framework through which to answer any and all opposition. In this sense, Popper and other attackers of occult phenomena as unscientific (i.e. “unnatural”) rest their argument on a myopic view of the nature of human knowledge and understanding. When we look at the nature of the systems that we use to describe the world, we see a set of common factors or goals that we seek to attain. While there may be some debate as to the teleological or ontological nature of life and existence, there is little doubt that explanatory systems are, themselves, purpose-driven. At the outset, we seek to explain some

*thing*, rather than taking a pre-existing explanation for things and making the evidence fit. This being the case, we find that the two main goals of the explanatory system of science can be said to be *consistency*—rather than testability, falsifiability, and refutability—and rationality, as they allow us to function and extend the existence of our lives.

Consistency allows scientists to rest in relative certainty with the knowledge that their ideas about the future and the past are matching up and that, all else being equal, tomorrow will be similar to today. For Hume and Jung, the mind seeks to integrate experiences and make them into some kind of “norm.” Rationality—defined by science as the methodical and, of course, consistent investigation of nature—offers us another step towards systematization by providing an additional criterion for systems and their results to meet. Faivre evidences this position. The thing to note here is that both of these criteria offer arbitrary points of orientation, points that allow science to systematically approach the rest of the concepts that it is trying to describe and define. From rationality and consistency science produces what we may call “objectivity,” as it has drawn a clear line of demarcation, arbitrary though it may be, between the subject and the object of study. Though this method affords us a means to describe our world, it is by no means the only system available to us.

Every successful system that exists is founded upon the basic premise that our correlational data is consistent. That is to say that when we input certain values for X, we can repeatedly expect a certain observation Y. What inputs we have at X will vary from system to system, but the basic computation will remain the same. The point of the systematic construct is to allow us to frame and describe the world in a way that allows us to work within it and to manipulate it for the purpose of our continued survival. If an over-arching system such as “magic” uses inputs that include belief, ideological constructs and the configuration of the

investigator/practitioner's ideas about all of these things, as well as the gross physical, atomic, sub-atomic, and biological processes with which the various branches of science concern themselves, then the system will yield consistent results just so long as we take these factors into account. We can see in the works of Carl Jung and the phenomenologists that there is a real power and meaning to the combination of mental symbols that prompts the experiencer to perceive the world in a way that allows her to take actions that reflect her mental state, thus, in turn, changing the experiential quality of the world for any other observers of the event. What matters here is that the mental and the physical are on a continuum of experience rather than being unconnected dualities. The experience of nature, then, is the important thing, and the description of that experience can take any number of forms.

As described above, with each new piece of information added into the system of magic, we have to take more and more factors and combinations of time, place, meaning, interpretation and belief into account. From this we extrapolate outward from a fundamental non-understanding of the world into a system that allows us, at the very least, to function in and to describe the world consistently. That there may be multiple differences between this system and any other is not something that should surprise or confound us, if we understand that each system may function properly within its context. The question becomes, then, what is the nature of the context in which each system functions? How do we delineate the edges of each context such that we know when to apply each system? It is in answering these questions that we concern ourselves with the observation of the data and the idea that belief may be an important input variable. What we have, in terms of context, will be determined by what we are trying to correlate and experience. If I am discussing the "objective" nature of the experiential universe, then my requirements will be judged based upon shared and corroborated experience and

observation. If, however, I am discussing the purely experiential nature of the universe in terms of what I see, feel, believe, and what this then *means* for me, then my criteria for judgment are relational to the other contents of my psyche and experience. Problems only arise when we try to claim that one system can be used across all contexts.

### **E. Magic, Science, and the Natural: What is “Natural?”**

Let it be perfectly clear that the assertion that magic and science are identical is not at all what is under discussion. They are not. What key scholars who are investigating these practices and phenomena are trying to state is not that in magical practices and the scientific method you have two ways of saying the same thing, but rather that in science and magic you have two different ways of *investigating and approaching the same reality*. So what is “Natural?” In the traditions of many groups such as Wiccans, Native Americans, and Neo Pagans, “natural” is that which comes from the Earth, untouched and untempered by human hands. But if we are to restrict the definition of “Nature” so fully, then we may ask in response how something unnatural can be made from components which are, themselves, *only* natural? Atom combinations and molecular chains may be artificially constructed, but they are no more unnatural for that than is a diamond. In each case, a series of external pressures and forces have taken base forms and combinations, and made them into something other than they once were. How, then, is either of them artificial? In much the same way, any system constituted by natural things and descriptions of the various effects upon them cannot be said to be “unnatural,” and it most certainly cannot be said to be above or outside of that which has created it. It is not, therefore, “supernatural.”

Magic, as a descriptive system, deals with the components of the universe and their arrangement in ways that are comparable to, but not synonymous *with*, those of science. As a

descriptive system, magic is concerned with different entities, terms, and units of measurement than those of science. Though it could be said that they are describing the same reality, science and magic are concerned with vastly different contexts. Whereas science claims to present an objective, *quantifiable* reality, magic's purview can be said to be that of the subjective *quality* of reality.<sup>108</sup> Rather than utilizing such a sharp distinction, however, I would posit that each of the two descriptive systems has elements of objectivity and subjectivity within it. That is to say, every scientific description is made via a human being with a functioning perceptual apparatus, the observations and interpretations of which will differ, if only slightly, from any other human being. In the same vein, magical descriptions can be seen to be made on a shared collection of subjective, individual experiences with agreed-upon definitions. As such, the resulting overlap of these descriptive systems is imperfect, though necessarily similar.

Our investigation has concerned itself with the “natural world,” being the world of which we are aware and on which we all agree—the world we seek to understand and apprehend. The systems by which we do this may change, but the aim of the work is the same. Faivre notes that Mircea Eliade wrote that myth travels between belief and knowledge, in order to assure “the insertion of Man in every direction of space,” meaning that in every system we create, and every pattern we define, we seek to find ourselves and our formulae.<sup>109</sup> This is not at all to say that what we create is any less meaningful for being created; rather created meaning is the *only type of meaning that we have*. We are necessarily unable to devise a system that can fully analyse itself or the system that created it (meaning the human psyche and societies), so we must be content to explore the *contents* of that system as fully as we can and to find some means of operating more efficiently in the world, whatever we determine that efficiency to be.

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Aleister Crowley, Carl Jung.

<sup>109</sup> Faivre, pg. 132.

Magic, then, like the creation or practices of a psychology, a religion, a philosophy, a history, a language, a system of mathematics (or the act of studying any of the above) is a process of seeking to understand the world via belief, knowledge, and corroborating evidence. If this is the case, then it may be said that the competing systems of investigation are, at the present time, simply incapable of isomorphic comparison; that is that their observations and explanations cannot be mapped onto one another on a 1:1 ratio. That this is the case need not be a stumbling block, any more than it is to the students of philosophy and religion who recognize that there is no one-to-one relationship between what their beliefs and thoughts mean to them and the systems of mathematics and physics that seek to describe the world. In fact, there is no complete correlation between any two systems unless they are specifically designed to be so compatible. Magic, in the many forms in which that term is used and over-used, is simply another human attempt to define and engage the world. As Glucklich notes, while the practices and experiences of those engaged in magic are out of the ordinary, they are anything *but* “supernatural.”<sup>110</sup>

Knowing this and having redefined our terms thusly, we may again look at magic as one of a number of systems used to parse the world in which we operate, concerned not with inferior or deficient explanations but with those explanations which are applicable to different kinds of meaning. Magic is not to be disparaged as nonsensical, infantile misunderstandings of the nature of cause and effect, but should instead be studied as a structure whereby the practitioner attempts to categorize the interrelations between the self, language, the external world, and the people within it. In so approaching magic, we may come to a better understanding not only of the human drive for categorization and the relationship of “self” to “other,” but also of the evolution of the meanings we ascribe the components of the natural and rational exercises. This understanding then allows us to be more aware and mindful in all of our investigations as

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<sup>110</sup> Glucklich, pg. 13.



scholars. We are able to recognize more fully the types of questions we are asking and to consider if those are the types of questions that can be meaningfully answered by the subject under our investigation, or if we possibly need to re-evaluate the relationship between our system of inquiry and description and the subject on which we bring that system to bear.

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