

Book review

Tyson, Paul 2019.

Seven Brief Lessons on Magic 2019. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

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Despite initial appearances, Tyson's essay is not about "practical magick," that is, the kind you might come across upon at a book-handler of *esoterica*, or perhaps at your local Thelemite support-group. It touches on the persistence of belief in occult phenomena well into our so-called "disenchanted" age, and does give hints as to why "magic" has not died down as of yet. But more basically, this is an intervention of philosophical theology, one aimed firstly at the academic culture of materialist reductionism. The upshot of this reductionism, for Tyson, is that "magical meanings and higher purposes are no longer part of practical reality or academic knowledge," with the result being that we "have cut qualitative and spiritual wisdom off from knowledge and power" (p. ix). In response to this, Tyson offers a brief, albeit suggestive, proposal for an essentially Platonist metaphysics of "non-scientific truths" (p. vii). For in accordance with Plato's transcendence of the intelligibles, Tyson seeks to reemphasise the non-reducibility of "values and meanings" to "the gaze of science" (p. viii), which in some quarters has ostracized "the magic of quality and purpose" or any "cosmic mystery of intelligibility" (p. xi). One key proposal of this book, drawn from some unpublished work of John Milbank, is a typology of theories of magic, which he dubs as *animist, Platonic, supernatural and anti-magical*. Such disambiguation serves Tyson in his own course towards a revised Platonist conception of the magical, beyond the myopia of deflationary science and physics.

In Lesson One, Tyson doubts whether the de-magicked narrative of contemporary culture can be sustained: that at one time we believed in the reality of occult forces and that now (in the West at least) we all know that thaumaturgy is a relic of a more hysterical age. Tyson thinks that this narrative conceals an unreflective dualism between "the outer world of factual scientific knowledge and practical technological power," on the one side, and "the inner world of imagination, meaning, purpose, and value" (p. 3) on the other. It postulates a significant distinction between fact and

value, the natural and the cultural, “a separation between a primary factual world of bare objects and subjectively perceived secondary qualities,” one that “renders objective reality itself as brute fact, without meaning” (p. 30). And yet as Bruno Latour argued, as well as analytic philosophers before him, this is not cogent or practically serviceable. But if this is so, if meaning is in some way intrinsic to the physical world, then can we not say that matter is in some sense already enchanted, being saturated with significance? For Tyson, quality cannot be reduced to measurement or quantity but is a genuinely emergent property, something that exceeds its physical analysis and enumeration. The experience of love, or a Palestrina *missa*, cannot be reduced to endocrinal phenomena or pulsing neurons (pp. 42–50). In other words, subjective and conscious experience is something real and emergent, and not reducible to its material constituents.

This is not to say, as Lesson Three suggests, that disenchantment did *not* happen in some sense (p. 19–28). However, it is certainly not the whole story. The advance of scientific enlightenment has not dimmed the public’s fascination with otherworldly realities, religion, magical powers, and so on. One reason for this, so Tyson believes, is that magic speaks to our quotidian experiences of wonder, our investment in meaningfulness, and speculation regarding mysterious energies: whether this might be amazement at the sheer presence of being, or things such as dark energy or the inscape of consciousness. Kierkegaard’s account of first-person subjectivity as the irreducible site for an engagement with truth is pertinent here, as Tyson shows (pp. 31–36). The Inklings also make an appearance, especially in regard to their theory that “imagination” can grant a more penetrating access to reality than positivism (pp. 36–41).

One could supplement this story further by saying that magical beliefs have actually long coexisted with scientific discovery. Paul Feyerabend in *Against Method* had already shown that progress in the sciences does not follow a straight path, and may divert, on occasion, through the circuitous routes of the esoteric and the metaphysical. The Popperian picture of hypothesis, testing and falsifiability does not cover the range of scientific advancement. As Jason A. Josephson-Storm argues extensively in his *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), magical perspectives have consistently existed alongside the development of modern science and

philosophy, right from its beginnings in Francis Bacon and, even more famously, in the alchemically-minded Isaac Newton. For instance, James Frazer – and his devotee Aleister Crowley – both sought to conceive magic as being a proto-scientific endeavour, in contrast with “religion,” which they both dismissed as superstition. (And Max Weber, proclaimer of the *Entzauberung*, mingled with occult coteries and sex magicians in Monte Verità ... a scurrilous factoid by today’s standards, but an open secret then). For our purposes what is interesting to note is that part of Josephson-Storm’s argument is that the language of “disenchantment” is itself influenced by mythological precursors, such as stories of “the departure of the fairies” at the dawn of the age industrial farming and the like. In a similar way, Tyson seeks to trace, very schematically it should be said, the beginnings of anti-magical tendencies to developments *within* the knowledge-regimes of the magical.

In Lesson Two, Tyson divides magical conceptuality into four groupings, proceeding largely in chronological order. In this scheme, animist magic is understood as being “entirely located *within* nature” and a broader pantheism (p. 8). Distinguished from this is the Platonist and medieval views of magic which asserted a real transcendence of the magical *beyond* nature, one that is “*derived from and dependent on* a higher immaterial reality.” Without this, they contended, “the observable world ... would be a field of incomprehensible flux and contingency” (p. 8–9). However, in the period thereafter, the gradual ascendancy of ideas such as *natura pura* began to foment an ever-greater dualism between nature and the influx of divine grace, a move traced by Jacob Schmutz to the decline of Neoplatonist accounts of ontological *influentia*. This spurred a more explicitly “supernatural” reading of magic which imagines worldly being as “decisively separate from heavenly supernature,” having the result that “natural things no longer have any magical mystery about them.” But if “nature” can be understood without reference to “supernature” then “the supernatural becomes *functionally superfluous* to our knowledge of the world” (p. 10). Nature now can be conceived independently of grace, and “non-magical matter is now *all there is*” (p. 11). Meaning is not intrinsic but imposed from “outside.” It is this metaphysical shift that serves as “the womb of modern science” (p. 12) in which “only the purely natural is deemed to be scientifically real, and if only what science can tell us about

nature is *valid* knowledge, then ... both the supernatural and the magical become redundant” (p. 14). This is the anti-magical view of contemporary scientism.

This view lays the groundwork for modern epistemology, like in Kant, where knowledge is divided into *a priori* structures of the mind which are then imposed onto the exterior world, but with no corresponding knowledge of things-in-themselves or unobservable causes. In Lesson Six, entitled “The Magic of Essence,” Tyson speaks to the commonsensical view that we are able, however partially, to know what things really are. He writes, inspired by Plato and Aristotle (and their medieval reception), that “we may only ever have a partial knowledge of the true essence of things, and we certainly have a very limited knowledge of Being, and even less of its divine grounds, but what truth we can grasp is genuine truth,” because for “the essentialist stream of classical and medieval thinking, thought is meaningful and knowledge can be true because *the nature of reality itself is intrinsically intellective*” (p. 53). Plato was not privy to the modern separation of the natural and the supernatural. For him, all of reality participates in the intelligible and the beautiful, drawing us upward to the Good-Beyond-Being. This vision abides in the thinking of Augustine, who transcends pagan philosophy with its “cycle of birth, struggle and death,” towards “a Platonist metaphysics of divine love” (p. 65). This is an *eros* that does not negate the material, for love deals with real bodies, and also take us beyond a dualism of pure nature and an animism that leaves us only with the immanence of the physical world.

In summary, we can say that Tyson coheres with those like Rowan Williams, who in *The Edge of the Words: God and the Habits of Language* (Bloomsbury, 2014) similarly sought to overcome the mind-matter dualism through an analysis of how we speak and develop of our language, and how this in turn opens up into metaphysics. Tyson’s work is more programmatic, conceived as an ever-so cheeky counterpoint to Carlo Rovelli’s *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (pp. 55–58). One would like to see a more worked-out picture in the future. Particularly the historical sections on *natura pura* and its relation to the genealogy of magical understanding need development, so that their details can be analysed. There was also a significant amount of contemporary literature on science and magic which was not engaged – Copenhagen, Styers and Tambiah come to mind. Space and length were

certainly a concern. Moreover, no satisfactory account of Platonism, magic and Christian metaphysics can exclude Bruno, Paracelsus, or Mirandola. Maybe they are too edgy for such a limited and already controversial scope. Certainly, anthropologists and historians have done this more expansively; but it seems to me that systematic theology is still waiting for a more developed and constructive engagement on this front – and especially in Africa where “magic” continues to be entangled with our daily economies and life-worlds.

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