Introduction: The Limits of Reason

Nature is false; but I’m a bit of a liar myself.

ALEISTER CROWLEY, The Book of Lies, ch. 79

This book is about people who have sought to explore the outer limits of reason. Some of them were eminent natural scientists, some were philosophers, while others were steeped in the currents of occultism. They all shared an opposition to certain epistemological presuppositions that had been dominant since the Enlightenment. They re-visited fundamental questions concerning the possibility of metaphysics, freedom of will, and the explicable of the natural world. They redrew the relations between facts and values, mechanism and purpose, and science and religion. The solutions our protagonists came up with may appear heterodox when judged against the received view of Enlightenment thought. Yet, their ostensibly deviant responses were formulated in the middle of one of the most extraordinary periods of scientific development in recorded human history. Indeed, some of our protagonists contributed directly to those very developments.

The core argument of this book revolves around the famous thesis attributed to Max Weber that a process of intellectualisation and rationalisation has led to the “disenchantment of the world”.¹ This process was thought to be theological in origin: the invention of monotheism in antiquity pushed the divine, mysterious, capricious and “magical” out of the mundane affairs of the world, paving the way for a rationalisation of ethical systems and economic behaviour as well as epistemology.² The move from theological immanence to transcendence was radicalised during the Reformation, in polemical exchanges where the “pagan” immanence of Roman Catholicism was singled out as heretical by Lutheran and Calvinist reformers. In the Enlightenment period, the separation of divine and world would form the basis for separating “religion” from “science”: religion deals with transcendence and “ultimate concerns”, while science works with empirical investigations in the domain

¹ See especially Weber, ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’.
of autonomous nature. The blueprint for the “non-overlapping magisteria” of science and religion was born,\(^3\) with “magic”, “sorcery” and the “occult” pushed into the margins.\(^4\)

However, the process of disenchantment (Entzaub rung) concerned much more than what Keith Thomas famously called the “decline of magic”.\(^5\) Above all, the disenchantment of the world meant that people’s epistemic attitudes towards the world had changed: they no longer expected to encounter genuinely capricious forces in nature. Everything could, in principle, be explained, since ‘no mysterious, incalculable powers come into play’.\(^6\) But the explicable-ability of the natural world came at a price, for the eradication of immanence also meant that there could be no natural, factual, this-worldly foundation for answering questions of meaning, value, or how to live one’s life. Nature was dead and inherently meaningless. Questions concerning values and meaning belonged to the transcendent realm, and answers could not be found in an interrogation of nature. The disenchanted mentality was optimistic about acquiring (factual) knowledge of nature, but pessimistic about knowledge of values. Moreover, with the validity of religion now predicated on the strictest transcendence, “genuine” religiosity required an intellectual sacrifice, an admission that “genuine” religious beliefs and practices could never be justified with appeal to reason, evidence, or fact. Thus it was not only “magic” and “sorcery” that had become problematic and condemned to the margins; to paraphrase Weber, anyone who claimed to derive values from facts, or mixed science and religion without undergoing an intellectual sacrifice, were “charlatans” or victims of “self-deceit”.\(^7\)

In addition to disenchantment, this is also a book about Western esotericism. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff has argued, the production of “esotericism” as a historiographical category since the Enlightenment is closely intertwined with the narrative of disenchantment described above.\(^8\) The diverse historical

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4 For the construction of these labels, see e.g. Randall Styers, *Making Magic*; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

5 Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. The scope of even that narrative of decline must be questioned. See, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World’.


8 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*; cf. idem, *Western Esotericism*. 