

## At the borders of knowledge

Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse 1900-1939* (Leiden, Brill, 2014), 631 pp.

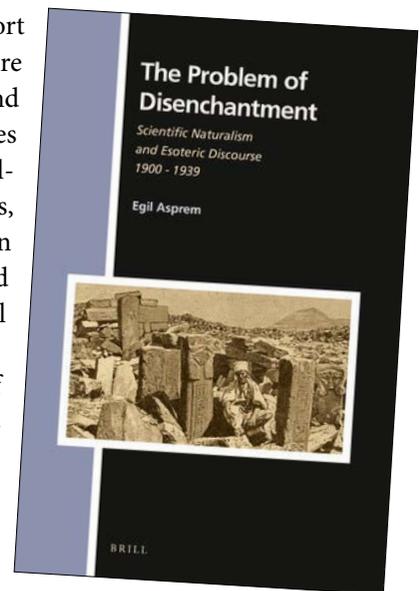
One of the main themes in Western intellectual history has been the separation of immanence and transcendence. This separation is crucial for the Christian understanding of natural and spiritual realms, and it lies also at the heart of modern epistemology, which tends to separate the knowable natural/empirical world from the in-principle unknowable sphere of the supernatural/metaphysical. Moreover, this separation has been incorporated in the usual understanding of modern science and religion: there seems to be an insurmountable gap between science (which studies the natural) and religion (which concerns itself with the supernatural).

However, as Egil Asprem demonstrates in *The Problem of Disenchantment*, the full picture of modern epistemology cannot be captured so easily. Asprem studies a range of competing intellectual positions in the intersecting fields of science, philosophy and occultism in early twentieth-century Europe and the United States, highlighting positions that have challenged the separation of science and religion in various ways.

Asprem frames his discussion in terms of naturalism – a concept that is central to modern epistemology and the philosophy of science. He argues that naturalism forms a negotiable position that leaves room for variety and dispute, depending on one's conception of 'nature'. Whereas scientific naturalists of the Victorian era depicted nature from a strictly materialistic and mechanistic point of view, there have also been others in scientific and occult circles who sought to open up the concept of nature to

include, for example, some sort of a vitalistic force or more subtle forms of matter and energy. Asprem introduces the term 'open-ended naturalism' to refer to these positions, which blur the line between natural and supernatural and pave the way to 'new natural theologies'.

The emerging view of modern knowledge-cultures is one of plurality, complexity and conflict, and the main goal of the book is to make this pluralism visible by reconceptualising Max Weber's famous disenchantment thesis in the context of '(new) problem history'. This recently formulated approach to intellectual and cultural history draws initial inspiration from *Problemgeschichte* that was developed in German history of philosophy in the late nineteenth century. New problem history updates the earlier approach with insights from Weber's methodological writings, as well as post-structuralist – especially Foucauldian – perspectives. Whereas the old *Problemgeschichte* studied historical answers to 'eternal' philosophical problems, new problem history understands problems as historically situated and contextual elements which arise from individuals' embodied experience. New problem history is also an interdisciplinary project: the underlying idea is that the problematic themes in each historical context tend to cross the boundaries of scientific disciplines and cultural fields. Hence, problem history proposes a synchronic and comparative



– instead of chronological and separated – analysis of various fields of knowledge.

Weber's original notion of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) denotes a wide and long-term socio-historical process which has resulted in a growing institutional and intellectual separation of religion and science in modern societies. In his clarificatory reconstruction of Weber's thesis, Aspren reduces the disenchanted intellectual condition to three claims, all having to do with 'epistemological attitudes' towards the world. 'Epistemological optimism' implies that there is nothing in the natural world or human experience that couldn't be, at least in principle, known and explained by scientific methods – or, as Weber puts it, there are no 'mysterious incalculable forces' within nature. On the other hand, disenchanted epistemology presumes 'metaphysical' and 'axiological scepticism', according to which there can be no true knowledge and therefore no scientific answers to questions of metaphysics and ethics: all questions about good and evil, the meaning and right conduct of life, or the existence and nature of supernatural, are subjects of mere opinion and belief.

As Aspren points out, it is important to note that the neo-Kantian Weber welcomed the 'disenchantment of the world' as 'the faith of our times', and saw the fully disenchanted position as the only proper starting point for doing rigorous science. Thus, for him, the separation of religion and science was not only a *description* of historical change but also an *imperative* for true scientific conduct. According to Weber, science can produce merely *facts* about nature, stating nothing about the value or meaning of these facts, and leaving the metaphysical and religious ponderings outside of the sphere of knowledge. In this disenchanted position all claims of *religious* knowledge are deemed false, and true religion is possible only with 'intellectual sacrifice'.

Aspren convincingly argues that this normative aspect of Weber's ideas makes the disenchantment thesis deeply problematic as a historical description. His main point is that scientists and philosophers of the twentieth century haven't *actually* been as disenchanted as Weber had hoped them to be: not all followed his neo-Kantian imperative of separation between facts and values as well as science and religion, but pushed the limits of reason and knowledge into the areas of metaphysics and even the 'supernatural'. Thus, Weber has a massive blind spot: all intellectual positions that fall somewhere between

the ideal-typical spheres of science and religion are disregarded. Beyond this blind spot we can find, for example, virtually all the positions that fall under the rubric of modern esotericism.

Aspren seeks to open a more nuanced and truthful viewpoint on modern intellectual history by understanding disenchantment not as a *process* but as a *problem* – or rather, as an interrelated set of problems, a problem field. Aspren explains his thought as follows:

Are there incalculable powers in nature, or are there not? How far do our capabilities for acquiring knowledge extend? Can there be any basis for morality, value, and meaning in nature? Can religious worldviews be extrapolated from scientific facts? If no, why? If yes, how? In short: the problem of disenchantment can be phrased like the main features of a 'disenchanted world', with question marks added.  
(p. 47)

Whereas the process view of disenchantment describes a chronological, large-scale development in modern culture, the synchronic problem view brings forth multiple concurrent possibilities and conflicts in this culture and across different intellectual fields. It is also worth noting that this viewpoint requires a shift towards methodological individualism: the focus is not on processes, structures, ideologies and so on, but on actual thinking and acting individuals and their responses to the problem of disenchantment.

Aspren studies the problem of disenchantment in three empirical contexts: natural science, parapsychology and esotericism. The book is divided accordingly: after the first part, which introduces the methodology and theoretical background, the three following parts discuss the selected fields of knowledge one by one, analysing how the problem of disenchantment has been formulated and responded to in their context. From this analysis arises an insightful image of modern knowledge-cultures, one which reveals interesting links between discourses and institutions in contrasting fields of knowledge. An intertwining of esoteric and scientific discourses in academic settings shows that esotericism cannot be understood simply as deviant and rejected knowledge belonging to the underground of modern culture. Quite to the contrary, esoteric discourses have often been formulated and applied by members

of high status both socially and academically, and they have a significant place in the larger context of modern knowledge construction.

Egil Asprem's *The Problem of Disenchantment* is an extensively interdisciplinary study of the knowledge-cultures of the early twentieth century. It combines a wide range of issues from different fields of research, such as intellectual history, the history and philosophy of science, and the study of religion and esotericism. It is an intricate piece of research, rich with valuable insights and initiatives, and it should well be considered as a mandatory read for anyone interested in modern intellectual history and the history of science, religion and esotericism. Drawing from a vast reservoir of theoretical and methodological positions, as well as working with an abundance of empirical sources, Asprem makes a major contribution to the study of modern intellectual cultures. ■

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