

Understanding Enchantment

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I am going to talk about the experience of enchantment, and how best to understand it. Then I'll go on to the implications in terms of a worldview. There are a couple that seem clearly relevant for the Scientific and Medical Network's overall project.

Let me start with three examples of enchantment, to give you a sense, a flavour of it. I'll preface them by saying that while anything or anyone can potentially enchant one, we are a particular kind of creature, so it mostly happens in certain contexts. These include, notably, interpersonal love of all kinds; the natural world, perhaps especially especially wild places; other animals than ourselves; religious rituals; art of all kinds, whether visual, aural, three-dimensional or literary; food and drink, an important but underestimated source of enchantment; learning; and often sports.

The first example I'm about to give you doesn't fall into any of those categories, though. It's what I call the enchantment of address, whereby a highly personal concern is inexplicably addressed by (for want of a better term) the cosmos.

On a fair day in early autumn, a friend was walking in a London park, oppressed by her approaching fiftieth birthday and, it seemed, old age, when she saw a bright turquoise-blue balloon floating high overhead before disappearing into the distance. A while later, she noticed it again, now floating on the edge of a pond. Concerned that waterfowl might become entangled in the trailing string, she managed to retrieve it, and turning it around, she found on it the words, 'Happy 50th Birthday!'

My second example is one of the best personal records of radical enchantment, namely that of Aldous Huxley, recalling what happened when he took mescaline the morning of 6 May 1953 in Los Angeles. I'm sure it will be familiar to some of you, but let me remind you that what struck Huxley, as he beheld some flowers in a vase, was that

Plato seems to have made the enormous, the grotesque mistake of separating Being from becoming and identifying it with the mathematical abstraction of the Idea. He could never, poor fellow, have seen a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light ... could never have perceived that what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were – a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being...

Finally, here is the poet Louis MacNeice on a touchstone place for him in Ireland. (I have found poets to be among the very best witnesses of enchantment.)

Magilligan Strand was like falling in love. For such occasions the word 'falling' is right; one does not step into love any more than one steps asleep – or awake. For awake, like asleep, is what one falls, and to keep falling awake seems to me the salt of life ... We cannot of course live by Keats's Negative Capability alone, we must all, in E.M. Forster's phrase, use 'telegrams and anger'; all the same what I feel makes life worth living is ... the surrenders – it may be to the life-quickenning urge of an air-raid, to nonsense talked by one's friends, to a girl on top of the Empire State Building, to the silence of a ruined Byzantine church, to woods, or weirs, or to heat dancing on a

gravelled path, to music, drink or the smell of turf smoke, to the first view of the Atlantic or to the curve of a strand which seems to stretch to nowhere or everywhere and to ages before and after...

I could give many more examples but maybe that will suffice. (You'll find many more in my book.)

Fundamentally, enchantment is an experience of wonder. It varies in intensity from charm, through delight, to joy; and the last – which I call deep enchantment – can be life-changing. Its contrary, which partly defines it and vice-versa, is will: as in, the will-to-power, power-knowledge, and agenda.

Enchantment is relational. It happens as an encounter with an enchanting other, across a gap of difference which it instantly bridges. This other can be literally anything or anyone – it certainly doesn't have to be a human being – but whoever the other turns out to be, whether another human, a different animal, a place, a work of art, or even an idea – they become, in effect, a person, with a subjectivity and agency of their own. As you can imagine, this experience is extremely challenging to some powerful traditional (mostly religious) and modern (mostly secular) orthodoxies, so it often doesn't get talked about much in public.

Being relational, enchantment is ecological. That, after all, is what ecology studies. And also like the natural world, enchantment is wild. That's because in any relationship, properly so-called, no one party is in control; each of the at least two parties affects the other in an ongoing recursive process. So enchantment can be invited, but not ordered, controlled or managed; and when it happens, it does so as a gift. Hence the best attitude to have is one described by Freya Stark as 'fearless receptivity'.

Also by virtue of being relational, enchantment is necessarily participatory. You are in it, or else it's not happening. The etymology of the word implies as much: *enchantment*, from the old French, originally Latin, meaning 'to be in a song' – by extension, to find yourself in a narrative, a story, of any kind. And by the same token, 'the natural world' which I just mentioned includes human beings. We cannot stand entirely outside it, studying it dispassionately, because we are part of it.

Another inalienable characteristic of enchantment is that like love, it is only forever while it lasts. Time radically slows when it happens – may even stop – but not completely, or forever. Eventually the very slowly swirling eddy in the pool rejoins the larger swiftly-flowing stream of time and is swept away. For that reason, enchantment often has an undertow of melancholy. It's always passing, and the fact that it always might return isn't always much consolation.

But that passingness is inseparable from what makes enchantment precious: its unbiddability, by virtue of which the enchanting other *isn't* simply an extension or version of ourself, or under our control. J.R.R. Tolkien, whom I have found to be authoritative, describes it as 'a love and respect for all things, "animate" and "inanimate", an unpossessive love of them *as* "other"'. And he asserts that it is 'as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life'. Which implies, I think, that if people can't get the real thing, they will settle for counterfeits. The parallel with food, both real and 'fast', is quite exact.

In this case, the fraud is a simulacrum I call 'glamour'. Unlike enchantment, glamour is wholly biddable, manipulable, and full of purpose. In fact, it is a multi-billion pound industry, principally advertising but also spin, which is essential to the operations of both capitalism and the state. And its purpose is to deceive and disenchant, so that souls, starving for enchantment, keep coming back for more of what *cannot* satisfy. And pay for it.

Now Max Weber defines enchantment as ‘concrete magic’. What he means by that is it is always material, even carnal, *and* spiritual, deeply mysterious. It is *both*.

That makes enchantment problematic to the two dominant metaphysical camps of our time: scientific materialists, on the one hand, and Romantic supernaturalists, on the other. Much as they detest each other, they tacitly agree that you can carve up the world that way, and then reduce one truth to the other. Enchantment resists that whole process; and when it cannot, it dies.

Weber puts it this way: ‘The unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic, has tended to split into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into ‘mystic’ experiences, on the other. The inexpressible contents of such experiences remain the only possible ‘beyond,’ added to the mechanism of a world robbed of gods.’

In other words, the rational mastery of the sensible world – exactly the opposite of receptivity – drives out its mystery, which then has nowhere left to go but an apparently dematerialised ‘spiritual’ world. Those who feel its loss in this world, so to speak, then often make the mistake of accepting the second transcendental one as something which has to be *added* to the first – as the word ‘super-natural’ implies – in order to achieve wholeness. But that is no remedy, because the very act of splitting the two is, according to Weber, what results in ‘the disenchantment of the world’, including ourselves. That is a process with its roots in Platonism, then Pauline and Augustinian Christianity, then supercharged for modernity by Cartesianism.

Accepting that split acquiesces in disenchantment. And it is all too easy to do so, when such metaphysically loaded and value-laden polarities are so ingrained in our cultural traditions, most notably Greek and Christian: not only material *vs* spiritual, and body *vs* mind, but a whole series of associated hierarchical polarities: inner *vs* outer, higher *vs* lower, light *vs* dark, and – not least – male *vs* female. And since they have long been mapped onto each other, one set easily invokes the others; thus male = light = spirit or mind = higher = heaven, while female = dark = body = lower = the Earth. (The philosopher to read on this is Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.)

The point is not that these contrasts don’t exist, but that their meanings are not fixed essences. Rather they are relational, depending for their meanings on contrasts with other qualities – there is always more than just one – and they change according to context. In one set of circumstances, for example, darkness can be suffocating and extinguishing; but in another, it can be deeply nourishing and protective. By the same token, light can be either illuminating – enlightening – or relentless and tyrannical. (To be kept in bright light 24/7 is, of course, a form of torture.) And so on.

A few other philosophers have made the same point as Weber. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, writes: ‘Physiological life is of course not “life”. And neither is psychological life. Life is the world.’ And the world, needless to say, includes us.

Similarly, Gregory Bateson writes: ‘These two species of superstition, these rival epistemologies, the supernatural and the mechanical, feed each other.’ Why? Because they both accept the split and then set about eliminating it by a strategy of reducing one to the other. One side tries to explain away the spiritual as actually materialist, while the other tries to deduce the material world from Platonic Ideas, or archetypes, or whatever.

The upshot is two competing monisms. And with both of them, the process is circular. In imposing a single metric, concept and value of truth on everything, as a necessary preliminary to mastering it, monism disenchant. It does so through what Weber describes as the ‘belief...that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather

that one can, in principle, master all things through calculation.’ (For how this works with monotheism, see *The Price of Monotheism* by Jan Assmann.) The other half of the circle is that because disenchantment has lost sight – and the sound, and smell, and feel – of the illimitable richness and plurality of life, it facilitates the reign of monism in return.

When relationality is recognised as fundamental, monism becomes impossible. An experience of unity is fine, but not as any kind of support for a single Truth or Way, either explicitly or implicitly a complete Oneness. As Bateson puts it, ‘It takes two to know one.’ W.H. Auden makes the same point: ‘For there to be one, there must first be two.’ And the writer George MacDonald: ‘There can be no oneness where there is only one.’ Why? Because nothing can be identified as anything (actually, nothing *is* anything) except in relation to what it is not. So if there is oneness, there must also be something else which is different. Therefore the oneness isn’t truly one, because there is something it doesn’t include. So oneness always fails in practice – which is why Unity or Oneness must be, and always is, enforced. In the words of Barbara Herrnstein Smith, the resulting project is ‘to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally.’

Writing towards the end of his life, Bateson continues: ‘I find myself still between the Scylla of established materialism, with its quantitative thinking, applied science, and “controlled” experiments on one side, and the Charybdis of romantic supernaturalism on the other. My task is to explore whether there is a sane and valid place ... somewhere between these two nightmares of nonsense.’

More recently, David Abram has made the same point, criticising both scientific discourse (which privileges abstract objectivity) and New Age discourse (which privileges subjectivity). Each view, he says, ‘bolsters the other; by bouncing from one to the other – from scientific determinism to spiritual idealism and back again – contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that ... the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate nature... that is at once both sensible [that is, ‘objective’] and sensitive [or ‘subjective’].’

Describing experiences such as deep enchantment, the phenomenologist Henri Bortoft writes that ‘Far from being just a subjective experience, this is a “non-Cartesian” event which happens upstream before the separation into subject and object.’ So don’t accept any analyses of wonder as a psychological, subjective event, any more than you should ones which reduce it to neurophysiology. Both have already killed the subject, before even starting, by turning it into pure object.

The broader and deeper point here is that enchantment, as an experience of the wonder of life, reminds us that life is *both* subjective or spiritual *and* objective or material, plus all of their associated qualities.

For that reason, it is not ‘mystical’, if what is meant by that term is something wholly ineffable, without any reference to circumstances. As *concrete* magic, enchantment is always very precisely situated, embedded, and embodied as *this* person, in *this* place, at *this* moment.

Nor is it transcendent, in the usual sense of rising above the sensuous world or leaving it behind. The ‘magic’ part of enchantment is not a ‘beyond’, located elsewhere. Rather it is in its circumstances: not, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘the contrary of the sensible [but] its lining and its depth’. To put the matter another way, the transcendence of enchantment is immanent; it is not before or after or above or beyond life, but *in* and *as* life. And the farther in you go, the bigger and deeper and more mysterious it gets.

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What are the implications of all this for the project of the Scientific and Medical Network, so to speak? As I see it, there are at least three.

The first, which I've already touched on, is that uncritical calls for unity and proclamations of oneness, let alone Oneness, are unsustainable and should therefore be avoided. Why? Because of the relationality I started with, in at least two ways. The first is that oneness can only be known as such by virtue of its contrast with something *different*. Otherwise there is nothing to distinguish it, so it cannot be known, perceived, or apprehended. (Nor can it exist at all, but we won't go there now.) It follows that if oneness is known or asserted, then there must be something which it excludes because it is *not* oneness. Therefore the oneness isn't truly one.

The second way relationality works here is that – as the quotations from Bateson, Auden and MacDonald all clearly state – it is only where there is *more* than one person, thing, or whatever in play, that oneness can be experienced. Otherwise there is no-one or nothing to feel unity *with*.

So experiences of Oneness or unity are certainly possible, and often powerfully enchanting, but it's best to avoid jumping from them to inferring an apparently objective or universal Truth like 'All is One'.

The second implication is that affirming either one side or the other of the great divide – material vs spiritual, objective vs subjective and so on – simply reinforces the whole disenchanting splitting and its destructive effects. It's not a radical move; it doesn't go to the root of the problem. In fact, it reinforces the problem by accepting the split as foundational. The point is to *subvert* it. So if you really want to 'revolutionise the materialist paradigm', supercharging the idealist paradigm is the wrong way to go about it!

What this could mean instead, philosophically, is, for example, insisting not only on the truth of panpsychism – that there is no particle of matter which is not inhabited or accompanied or imbued with consciousness – but *also* the counter-truth: that there is no form of consciousness whatever which is entirely immaterial.

The third implication is perhaps more problematic, even unwelcome, but here's how I see it. As we have seen, enchantment – and lived life, of which it is an intensification – is lived in the first person. It is inalienably personal and particular, although in a way that opens a way into the cosmic and universal.

But modern science, from its beginnings at least 350 years ago right up to the present, is *committed* to a third-person perspective of so-called objective and (at least in principle) publicly verifiable phenomena. (Thomas Nagel, in *Mind and Cosmos*, is only one of the more recent and authoritative philosophers to confirm this.) This is not something that post-quantum physics altered; for real scientists, as opposed to science writers and popular philosophers, its weirdness was confined to strictly experimental contexts. The scientific ideal is a comprehensive system of true knowledge and a sure-fire method, preferably an algorithm, to attain it. It is this very ideal, carried into domains where it is inappropriate, which opens the door to scientism. And that's a hard door to shut, because no system is or can be comprehensive unless it includes the systematizer; but that eliminates any unmoving Archimedean point for 'objectivity'. Conversely, if it doesn't include the observer or theorist, then again, it isn't comprehensive. actually, it just gives it more to do.

Furthermore, to assume any methodology can ever automatically produce truth is the purest magical thinking, because a method will always need to be correctly applied, and there can be no rule for how to do so. Why? Because that meta-rule also needs to be correctly applied, thus requiring a further rule, and so on in an infinite regress. The need for personal judgement can never be eliminated, except by bad faith.

But these objections don't stop the scientific programme, because as philosophers like Paul Feyerabend and Mary Midgley has repeatedly shown, science is essentially a faith-based enterprise. (In the words of Alfred North Whitehead, 'Science repudiates philosophy; it has never sought to justify its faith.')

So there can't *be* a science, properly so-called, of participatory first-person experience. Nor can there be one of wisdom, which is equally unsystematisable, relational and contextual. The only way science can handle them is to first turn them into something else: something public, empirical, isolatable. And if a discourse resists that conversion process, it will be barred from the club, or ejected.

That is more-or-less exactly what happened to chaos and complexity theory, to general systems theory, to neo-Goethean phenomenology, to Bohm's implicate order, to Sheldrake's morphogenetic resonance, to Gauquelin's neo-astrology, and to most, at least, of Lovelock's Gaia theory. (In the last case, the effect was dampened by the fact that Lovelock is undeniably a scientist, even if of a type which is now very nearly extinct.) And if you can 'prove' – (a word that should be banned outside pure mathematics and logic, incidentally, because there is no such thing) – if you can 'prove', as I say, something which strongly contradicts current scientific knowledge using the current version of scientific methodology, then unless help arrives in the form of other supporting results, they will simply *change the rules*.

So my impertinent advice, Networkers, is to accept that you are using the word 'science', and a concept of science, that its official registered owners will never accept. And don't expect that they ever will.

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Earlier, I mentioned panpsychism as a theory that is friendly, at least, to enchantment, wisdom, and lived life. But I worry that panpsychism itself comes too close to a universalist, monist and absolutist theory, asserting that there just *is*, whether you know it, or like it, or not, consciousness everywhere, and so on. That's why I prefer animism, which I define as the principled habit of staying open to agency and subjectivity no matter where, when and in what form you encounter it. And that entails being receptive to relationship. So the *conditions* for enchantment, without any guarantee, are already met.

What this practice entails – what it both requires and produces – is not knowledge, but as I've already implied, wisdom. We surely don't need more knowledge – not even spiritual knowledge – whereas we are desperate for more wisdom.

Wisdom doesn't consist of propositions such as, 'Water is made up of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen,' or 'Human beings are rational maximisers of their self-interest,' or 'Life is governed by twelve (or however many) great spiritual principles'. Rather, it consists of, and works by, metaphor: the realisation that *this is that*. A classical example is, 'Achilles is a lion!' The effect is both a discovery of something that was already true, and that truth becoming real as a result of being discovered. And it's not merely *about* something or someone; it changes what the world *is*. In philosophical terms, it's not merely epistemological but rather ontological. Metaphoric truth thus breaks the rules of formal logic, according to which Achilles cannot be both a man and a lion at the same time, but must be unambiguously either one or the other. But that is a small price to pay for a new and profound truth, of which the great physicist Neils Bohr said that its opposite is not a falsehood but another profound truth.

And sometimes, such realisations are crowned with wonder.

Of course, the examples I gave a moment ago of supposedly factual propositions are also metaphors. (The give-away is the copula 'is', as in, 'This is that'.) But they are dead metaphors: butterflies, once alive, now chloroformed and pinned in the showcase of What We Know. But what I've just said is a living metaphor, even if it doesn't stay for long.

Finally, some people will almost certainly find enchantment, so understood, as unsatisfactory. They will want to hold out for eternal, unchanging, universal Truth of the kind

that Plato, Paul and, in his own way, Descartes promised us. But that pursuit, it seems to me, runs a terrible risk, namely losing what is *actually* on offer – limited, perhaps, but real – for a chimera. Because personally, I think deep enchantment is as good as it gets. We should be so lucky, even.

Thank you.