The problem of disenchantment: scientific naturalism and esoteric discourse, 1900-1939

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Acknowledgements

Somewhere in this book I borrow the argument of Bruno Latour that the real agency behind any single achievement in science and scholarship is broadly distributed in an “actor-network”: it is deceptive to identify singular achievements with singular agents, such as the name occurring on the front cover of a book, or the recipient of a prize of scientific merit. It would be naïve or dishonest to deny that this situation obtains also in my own case. “Egil Asprem” is but a nodal point in the broad actor-network that conspired to produce the present work (even though, as the author, he likes to believe he is at the very least one of the most central nodes in the network). It is, at any rate, the case that those who invoke actor-network theory in historical analyses of scientific work has an extra obligation to write a proper acknowledgement section prefacing their own work.

This book is the result of four years’ doctoral work at the University of Amsterdam. However, the breadth of its scope also reflects a much longer intellectual journey that started about ten years ago, with my parallel studies in the philosophy of science and the history of religion at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway. My memory is hardly reliable enough to guarantee that due credit is given to all contributors along this decade long path – the agent’s point of view is, after all, limited. Thus the following acknowledgments are not meant to be exhaustive, but to cover some persons and institutions whose input, influence, and contributions to the actual process of researching, writing, and editing this work I simply cannot avoid mentioning.

First of all, the funding. This research project was made possible by a TopTalent grant of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). It enabled me to pursue a self-defined project and enjoy a rather exceptional state of autonomy from the beginning. The process of getting this grant in the first place was, however, beyond my own control. An important node in the actor-network, therefore, was Dr. Ulrike Popp-Baier at the Department of Art, Religion, and Cultural Sciences at the University of Amsterdam. She was responsible for nominating me for the grant back in 2007, when I was still an MA student. If that decision had not been made, this work would never have gotten off ground in the first place.

Moving to the actual research, I wish to thank my supervisor, Wouter J.
Hanegraaff, whose suggestions and critical remarks have greatly helped refine my work. I should also mention that several important aspects of this book have developed as responses to, or in close engagement with, Hanegraaff’s own work. This goes in particular for the sections on esotericism, which have been written in dialogue with Hanegraaff’s evolving arguments, and with the privileged access to work of his that was still unpublished at the time of writing. This is a unique situation for a young researcher to be in, and has no doubt given an important advantage.

By extension, I must acknowledge the broader context of the Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents in Amsterdam. The atmosphere of intellectual cooperation and conviviality that prevails in this group has been a source of great inspiration. Thus, Dr. Peter Forshaw, Dr. Marco Pasi, and also Professor Kocku von Stuckrad – the latter now at the University of Groningen – must all be mentioned as part of the broader “Amsterdam school” of esotericism research, as constituted during the period of my involvement for this project and my preceding period as an MA student at the Centre. Furthermore, I cannot mention the Amsterdam milieu without giving credit to my co-PhD candidates: Joyce Pijnenburg and Tessel M. Bauduin. Collaborating with Tessel on the “Seduced by Science” panel at the IAHR conference in Toronto in 2010 was a great pleasure, and I think beneficial for both of our research projects. Joyce, on her part, has remained an important discussion partner for many years, as well as a good friend. Several of the central ideas found here were first tested on her.

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Other scholars have given valuable guidance on specific subjects. Most notably, the chapter on the history of physics and chemistry has benefitted greatly from the kind
assistance of Professor Anne Kox at the University of Amsterdam. Professor Kox not only read and corrected details in my understanding of the historical development of quantum mechanics and the relativity theories, but his meticulous knowledge of the primary sources, as well as the intricate physical concepts involved, also provided a good counterbalance to my reliance on more “constructionist” theoretical frameworks. The result, I think, has been a way of writing the history of modern science that takes constructionism as far as it has to go, but does not thereby lose sight of the “rational component” of scientific research programmes, or indeed of the continuity of work even between “paradigms” – a subject of much hyperbole, especially in the humanities and social sciences, following the popularisation of Thomas Kuhn’s work on “scientific revolutions”.

The chapters on parapsychology have benefitted from a dialogue with members of the parapsychological community. Dr. Eberhard Bauer kindly invited me to lecture at the IGPP in Freiburg in 2010, providing also an excellent opportunity to do research in their library and archives. Together with his colleagues, especially Dr. Andreas Fischer, Dr. Gerhard Mayer and Dr. Uwe Schellinger, Bauer has been of valuable assistance for getting to grips with the history of German parapsychology. Schellinger’s private tour of the IGPP archives was also a memorable experience. Outside Germany, contributors to the History of Psychical Research mailing list have been of help for testing certain obscure historical questions.

I also wish to thank Professor Peter Burke of the University of Cambridge, who participated in a workshop on the social history of knowledge in Amsterdam in the spring of 2011. Professor Burke’s encouraging comments on my revisions of Weber’s disenchantment thesis gave me extra confidence that I was on the right track. Burke’s interdisciplinary work in the history of knowledge has been a significant influence on my own approach.

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print books and made them almost universally available. The amount of digitized material now available through e.g. Archive.org and Google Books has most certainly been a key factor in making the breadth of the current project possible to cover in practice.

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