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

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Against Agnosticism
Psychical Research and the Naturalisation of the Supernatural

If we take in hand any volume of divinity, or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

David Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (1748), Part XII, section III.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the term “agnosticism” is riddled with controversy. It has become a broad label signifying anything from a noncommittal open-mindedness about religion or “spirituality,”¹ to a reluctant or sceptical attitude towards any kind of phenomenon where an attitude of belief is logically possible. As we shall see in this chapter, however, the term was originally developed in the late 19th-century to denote a science-oriented position of religious non-belief, proposed as an alternative to the ostensibly more dogmatic atheism. Agnosticism was first and foremost a contribution to debates about epistemological attitudes towards religion and metaphysics, developed in the context of Victorian naturalism. It functioned as an important strategic concept in the emancipation of the academic disciplines from the clutches of theology.² At the time the

¹ As an example of the confusion about these terms in daily speech, it is notable that a 2010 survey showed a majority of self-described agnostics in the US (55 %) expressing “belief in God”. Of these, furthermore, 17 % expressed that they were ‘absolutely certain’ of the matter. Intriguingly, the corresponding figures for self-styled “atheists” were 21 % and 8 %. These figures are quite remarkable considering the history of these terms and their intended meaning. See Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, ‘US Religious Landscape Survey, Report 2’, 5.

² For an intellectual historian’s perspective on the early history (and pre-history) of agnosticism, see Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism*. 
word “agnosticism” was first uttered in 1869, theology still had significant power over university life. Religious tests were, for example, required for anyone wishing to obtain a position at the most prestigious British universities (i.e. Oxford, Cambridge, Durham) until 1871, when the Universities Test Act was passed.\(^3\) In practice these tests were designed to exclude Roman Catholics (by requiring fellows to declare the doctrine of transubstantiation to be idolatrous), but also non-Christians and non-believers were affected by the requirement, and forced out of top institutions of education and research for purely theological reasons. Agnosticism was designed to counter the status of theology in the universities and in society at large by challenging all empirical claims made on religious grounds. Agnostics furthermore insisted that no-one should be publicly required to profess belief in any of the non- or trans-empirical doctrines that were beyond evidence and rational judgment. Following in the footsteps of Hume and Kant, the category of the supernatural was being dismantled into questionable claims about nature, on the one hand, and entirely transcendent and therefore unknowable things, on the other. Thus the authority of science was reinforced for all empirical matters while a strict epistemic boundary was erected, separating the purely transcendent claims of religion (which were of no empirical consequence) from science. Agnosticism, in this sense, represented a view entirely compatible with the disenchantment of the world.

By criticising the category of the “supernatural”, agnosticism struck not only against Christian theology, however. Anyone who made supernatural claims and demanded to be believed by others came under attack. Such claims were not hard to come by. With the rise in authority of the natural sciences in the 19th century, the “scientific” had become a desired commodity, and claims to “scientific evidence” were made for all sorts of phenomena, “supernatural” or otherwise.\(^4\) The rise of occultism and spiritualism in the 19th century is entirely symptomatic of this cultural climate: spiritualists claimed to provide empirical evidence of an afterlife, while occultists spoke

\(^3\) For the text of the act itself, see anonymous, ‘Universities Tests Act 1871’. For an overview of this and other legislation changing the interaction between religion and “secular” institutions in the period, see Russell Sandberg, *Law and Religion*, 23-30.

\(^4\) See e.g. Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 201-330; cf. the contributions to Hammer & James R. Lewis, *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*. 

293
warmly of an emerging synthesis of religion and science.\footnote{See e.g. Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain'. For occultism and science, see part four of the present work.} Being a concept that was primarily directed at and discussed in academic and intellectual circles, agnosticism posed a particularly serious challenge for those academics who wanted to explore the empirical claims of spiritualists in a scientific manner. This was precisely the aim of psychical research.

The aim of the present chapter is to situate psychical research in the context of its epistemological struggle with agnosticism and scientific naturalism. Rather than seeing the alternatives that have been posited to agnosticism as wholesale revolts against naturalism, I argue that the public controversy that was sparked by agnosticism at the end of the 19th century should be seen as an epistemological debate \textit{internal to} scientific naturalism. Agnosticism raised important questions about the limitations of natural knowledge, and the responses to it were part of a broader negotiation of where those boundaries were to be drawn. Psychical research took an active part in these negotiations, staking out a course that \textit{agreed} with naturalists in emphasising empiricism, but \textit{contested} the attempt of some agnostics to separate the claims of religion from the sphere of science. This latter aspect took the form of a movement against agnosticism in the psychical research literature, which provides us with an interesting entry point into questions that are of central importance for our continued focus on the problem of disenchantment. Psychical researchers’ struggle with the strictures of agnosticism and the broader epistemic principles of scientific naturalism amounted to a response to the problem of disenchantment: it refused to separate the supernatural from the natural, and insisted that “occult” phenomena could be studied seriously from a purely scientific point of view.

The refusal to separate the supernatural from scientific discourse was a necessary requirement for establishing a discipline of psychical research in the first place. In this chapter we shall see \textit{how} it was done, through the adoption of a number of different naturalising strategies. Merging the supernatural with the natural did not, however, mean instant enchantment. Demolishing the wall of separation that had been built between the scientific and the religious spheres by certain philosophers and theologians since the time of Kant, I shall argue, also made any “religious” claim vulnerable for severe criticism from a rational and empirical perspective. Ironically, the
most anti-religious of the agnostics – those who were already emphasising that there was very little left of religion once all of its “superstitious” empirical claims had been stripped away – were actually accommodated by psychical research’s manoeuvre. This, I will suggest, has been one of the lasting paradoxes of psychical research.

1 THE AGNOSTICISM CONTROVERSY AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM

The word “agnosticism” was first uttered by Thomas Henry Huxley at a private party in 1869. Looking back at how the concept had come about, Huxley later recalled how he had seen himself forced to invent a new term because all of the available “-isms” concerned with religion, from atheism and pantheism to deism and theism, had seemed insufficient or faulty on various points:

The one thing in which most of these good people [i.e. the atheists, pantheists, and theists] were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain “gnosis”; had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. ... So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of “agnostic.”

This term, Huxley recalled, had come into his head ‘as suggestively antithetic to the “gnostic” of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant’. Writing two decades after he had first shared his newfound “-ism” with friends at a party, Huxley now found his agnosticism at the centre of a controversy raging between scientists, philosophers, and clergymen, concerning the relation between scientific methodology, supernatural beliefs, and religious faith. At a church congress in Manchester in 1888, Henry Wace, the prebendary of St. Paul’s Cathedral and principal of King’s College, London, had accused “agnostics” such as Huxley of simply having invented a new epithet for “infidels”:

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7 Ibid., 21.
[Huxley] may prefer to call himself an agnostic; but his real name is an older one – he is an infidel; that is to say, an unbeliever. The word infidel, perhaps, carries an unpleasant significance. Perhaps it is right that it should. It is, and it ought to be, an unpleasant thing for a man to have to say plainly that he does not believe in Jesus Christ.8

According to Wace, the agnostic did not differ from the good Christian in his claim to hold no definite knowledge about transcendent realities, but rather in his refusal to accept the authority of the word of Christ through a leap of faith.9 The lecture’s theological condemnation was rather remarkable, seeing that it came from the principal of a major British research university, and it sparked a heated intellectual debate in the journals *The Nineteenth Century* and *The Fortnightly Review*.10 Huxley, defending himself fiercely and with much eloquence in these forums, thus also got an opportunity to clarify the exact implications of his agnosticism. It is in this polemical context that the implications of Victorian agnosticism must be sought. As we shall see, the debate clarified and corrected some common misunderstandings about the position.

In his first reply to Wace, Huxley made it clear that the principal’s understanding of agnosticism was based on certain grave misconceptions, which incidentally also made it possible for him to insist on labelling agnostics as good-old fashioned infidels.11 There must have been an ‘attractive simplicity to this solution’, Huxley wrote, but labelling a philosophical opponent an “infidel” rested on the rather inelegant assumption that one’s own position is right by default, and claiming therefore the right to morally judge the other based on whether or not this person agrees with one’s own pre-set dogma.12 The prerogative of denouncing the other as infidel, Huxley noted, becomes particularly absurd in the meeting of different cultures and religions with


9 This argumentation was not original. As Bernard Lightman has shown, this very point was made by the reverend Henry Longueville Mansel in lectures in the 1850s, which had a significant influence on at least Herbert Spencer’s form of agnosticism. Mansel, on his part, was clearly influenced by the epistemological and theological debates concerning Kant and his critics, especially Jacobi. See Lightman, *Origins of Agnosticism*, 30-31. For the German context, see Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860*, 87-104.

10 Eleven essays were collectively published in Huxley et al., *Christianity and Agnosticism* (1889).


12 E.g. ibid., 10.
opposing ultimate views, each equally an infidel in the other's eyes. This, of course, was a standard argument against religious dogmatism. More importantly, Huxley argued that the “infidel” interpretation of agnosticism overlooked something else, which was for him perhaps the most defining aspect of the position: its relation to naturalism, the principles of empiricism, and the accumulation and criticism of the total canon of knowledge.

The agnostic, according to Huxley, does not simply refuse to consider stories of anything connected with “supernatural” beliefs, as being always a priori meaningless or in principle unknowable. It was at least not primarily on this foundation that the agnostic would have problems with, for example, the gospels. The concern was rather with authority – not necessarily ‘the authority of Jesus Christ’, as Wace had alleged, but the authority (or plausibility) of witnesses, versus the authority of established knowledge. As Huxley responded, ‘the question as to what Jesus really said and did is strictly a scientific problem, which is capable of solution by no other methods than those practiced by the historian and the literary critic’. The historian and the literary critic did not operate in a vacuum, however: a part of the wider family of secular academic disciplines, the humanities specialist was obliged to judge the trustworthiness of historical witnesses by holding their statements up against well-established knowledge from across the fields of science. Thus, for example, the proper agnostic reading of the famous exorcism passage in Mark 5, where Jesus expelled a legion of “unclean spirits” from a possessed man among the Gadarenes is not simply one of suspending belief or disbelief in the events as stated by the evangelist. The agnostic can draw upon a solid base of knowledge about how the world works, and, in this case, not least about the functioning of the mind and of the development of human cultures and belief systems:

everything that I know of physiological and pathological science leads me to entertain a very strong conviction that the phenomena ascribed to possession are as purely natural as those which constitute small-pox; everything that I know of anthropology leads me to think that the belief in demons and demonical possession is a mere survival of a once universal superstition, and that its persistence at the present time is pretty much in the inverse ratio

13 Ibid., 10-11.
14 Ibid., 10.
of the general instruction, intelligence, and sound judgment of the population among whom it prevails.\textsuperscript{15}

Focusing on demonic possession was clearly a strategically advantageous choice for Huxley. Apart from being a subject of much scientific interest among psychologists and physicians, and thus an excellent example of a "supernatural belief" where competing naturalistic explanations were available, it was also an easy topic for the disbeliever to gain the moral high ground. Huxley needed only refer to inhumane horrors committed in the name of exorcism, or the prosecution of witchcraft, to argue that the belief was not only poorly founded, but that it also had a long history of particularly dangerous social and legal consequences.\textsuperscript{16} In the end, the reasons to disbelieve the authority of the synoptic gospels on the accounts in question were connected with the three considerations, namely ‘humanity’, ‘common sense’, and ‘science’:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{humanity}, noting the frightful consequences of this belief;
\item \textit{common sense}, observing the futility of the evidence on which it is based, in all cases that have been properly investigated;
\item \textit{science}, more and more seeing its way to inclose all the phenomena of so-called "possession" within the domain of pathology, so far as they are not to be relegated to that of the police – all these powerful influences concur in warning us, at our peril, against accepting the belief without the most careful scrutiny of the authority on which it rests.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{itemize}

The bottom line for the agnostic was thus to not take anybody’s word for it – even if it meant a break with piety. This, Huxley noted, led to a certain dilemma concerning the authority of scripture, as judged by the agnostic:

I can discern no escape from this dilemma: either Jesus said what he is reported to have said, or he did not. In the former case, it is inevitable that his authority on matters connected with the “unseen world” should be roughly shaken; in the latter, the blow falls upon the authority of the synoptic gospels. If their report on a matter of such stupendous and far-reaching practical import as this is untrustworthy, how can we be sure of its trustworthiness in other cases?\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 11
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 11-12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 12.
Unless one was willing to accept, on face value, that actual demon possession is possible, and that exorcisms like those of Jesus can be performed, the only choices left for the interpreter were to disbelieve the gospels or to question the integrity of Jesus.

The actual position of the agnostic is thus slightly different from the one that Wace had portrayed. It was not a stubborn refusal to believe in specific doctrines of faith, connected with entirely transcendent realities, but rather a *weighted* consideration and judgment of the *likelihood* of claims being true or not, in light of the total store of (scientific) knowledge. This consideration could not rule out the unreliability of witnesses, and would generally consider false testimony to be much more likely than the bending of natural law, especially in the case of obvious contradictions with established scientific knowledge. The valuing of evidence is thus a crucial element of Huxley’s agnosticism which often gets overlooked or misunderstood – both in his own days and in later conceptions of agnosticism. The disbelief associated with agnosticism is not of a purely *a priori* character, but deals rather with the empirical (and rational) *justification* of beliefs and the *coherence* of knowledge in general. In his reply to Wace concerning demonic possession and exorcism, Huxley made this point clear:

> Let me be perfectly candid. I admit I have no a priori objection to offer. There are physical things, such as ... *trichinae* [i.e. parasitic roundworms], which can be transferred from men to pigs, and *vice versa*, and which do undoubtedly produce most diabolical and deadly effects on both. For anything I can absolutely prove to the contrary, there may be spiritual things capable of the same transmigration, with like effects. Moreover, I am bound to add that perfectly truthful persons, for whom I have the greatest respect, believe in stories about spirits of the present day, quite as improbable as that we are considering. So I declare, as plainly as I can, that I am unable to show cause why these transferable devils should not exist, nor can I deny that, not merely the whole Roman Church, but many Wacean “infidels” of no mean repute, do honestly and firmly believe that the activity of such-like demonic beings is in full swing in this year of grace 1889. Nevertheless, as good Bishop Butler 19 says “probability is the guide of life” and it seems to me that this is just one of the cases in which the canon of credibility and testimony, which I have ventured to lay down, has full force. So

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19 Joseph Butler (1692–1752), the bishop, theologian, and philosopher who was a contemporary of, and influence on, such leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment as David Hume, Thomas Reid, and Adam Smith.
that, with the most entire respect for many (by no means for all) of our witnesses for the truth of demonology, ancient and modern, I conceive their evidence on this particular matter to be ridiculously insufficient to warrant their conclusion.\textsuperscript{20}

Despite its simplicity, this position has apparently been very hard to understand; when Wace replied once more to Huxley’s defence, he wrote as if he had not grasped the point at all. Huxley had admitted that there were no \textit{a priori} reasons to exclude the hypothesis of demons, Wace wrote triumphantly, and prematurely concluded that the battle had been won:

Very well, then, as the highest science of the day is \textit{unable to show cause against the possibility} of the narrative, and as I regard the Gospels as containing the evidence of trustworthy persons who were contemporary with the events narrated, and as their general veracity carries to my mind the greatest possible weight, I accept their statement in this as in other instances. ... I repeat that I believe it [the Gadarene story], and that he [Huxley] has removed the only objection to my believing it.\textsuperscript{21}

The conclusion Wace drew from Huxley, put in italics above, betrays a failure to grasp the most essential point of agnosticism, and that which truly distinguishes it from mere denial or refusal to believe: that the burden of proof falls on the person making a claim. Showing that a claim about a certain course of events is not \textit{impossible} from a purely logical point of view can hardly count as a reason to believe that it actually happened. This is especially true if the claim contradicts alternative explanations of the event that are independently backed up by credible evidence. In a later essay in the same debate, Huxley made this point much clearer. Agnosticism means to adhere to a quite specific \textit{epistemic principle}:

This principle may be stated in various ways, but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty. ... That which agnostics deny and repudiate as immoral is the contrary doctrine, that there are propositions which men ought to believe,

\textsuperscript{20} Huxley, ‘Agnosticism’, 15-16.

without logically satisfactory evidence; and that reprobation ought to attach to the profession of disbelief in such inadequately supported propositions.\textsuperscript{22}

The threat of reprobation for refusing to believe in propositions that have no support outside of theology was a very real one, insofar as the memory of religious tests in universities still lingered. This memory must have given the polemical statements of the university principal Wace a particularly unpleasant ring in the ears of professional scientists concerned with the free and frank pursuit of knowledge. While the agnostic position does not dismiss \textit{a priori} the possibility of “supernatural” beings of some sort, it does claim that it is irrational to hold specific beliefs about them unless there is strong evidence backing the belief. Moreover, it is entirely \textit{unreasonable} to expect others to accept one’s personal belief in such beings without any justification: if one wishes for others to share one’s belief, the task falls upon the claimant to produce evidence which ‘logically justifies’ one’s certainty of the belief in question. In the case of Huxley, one might say that the epistemic principle of agnosticism leads to a \textit{de facto} or \textit{a posteriori} denouncement of the supernatural, a position against which one cannot simply argue by saying that it is “logically possible that” some supernatural being exists, or some supernatural event could have taken place. One must respect and play by the rules of empirical science. Huxleyan agnosticism might in this sense be described as “qualified”, or “weighted disbelief”.

Agnosticism, as it emerges from the writings of Huxley, is inseparable from the epistemology of scientific naturalism. If confronted with a phenomenon claimed by some person to be of supernatural origin, then the first thing the agnostic naturalist needs to do is to suspend judgement about the specific explanation offered, and ask instead if there are alternatives which would, in fact, render the phenomenon in question intelligible in light of the whole body of knowledge. If the phenomenon is only brought forward by testimony, then distrusting the accuracy or even the honesty of the witness is a perfectly viable option – contrary, no doubt, to good Victorian etiquette.

In closing this section, an illustration of how the naturalist’s expulsion of supernaturalism could look like in practice may be provided by the psychiatrist Henry Maudsley’s (1835–1918) tellingly entitled \textit{Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings} (1886). Maudsley was a leading authority on the mind and mental health in Victorian

\textsuperscript{22} Huxley, ‘Agnosticism and Christianity’, 96-97.
Britain, working from an unmistakably materialistic, physiological basis. In his book on the relation between supernatural beliefs and natural causes, Maudsley took a decidedly reductionist approach. All claims about the supernatural could be accounted for by man's inherent tendencies towards 'malobservation and misinterpretation of nature', on the one hand, and genuine psychological disturbances, on the other: hallucinations, hysteria and other psychiatric pathologies. Maudsley illustrates the Huxleyan point that one should start to look for explanations of seemingly inexplicable occurrences (and claims of such) among mechanisms that one does know something about. In Maudsley's case, a firm footing was found in well-established knowledge of human nature, propensities to error and bias in observation and interpretation, and in various psychological conditions.

Huxley and Maudsley represent the mainline of scientific naturalism, but its epistemology on a whole was not entirely settled, nor without internal challenges. As I will venture to show in the next section, psychical research grew out of disputes over the reach of naturalism in which the question of agnosticism was particularly acute. I will suggest that psychical research was part of an alternative strand of naturalistic epistemology which might be called “open-ended naturalism”.

2 PSYCHICAL RESEARCH AS OPEN-ENDED NATURALISM

The exact meaning and implication of agnosticism was not clear at the close of the 19th century. Between 1896 and 1898, the psychologist and philosopher James Ward gave a series of Gifford Lectures on the topic, published in 1899 as the two-volume *Naturalism and Agnosticism*. Ward argued that agnosticism, despite having been developed as a

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24 For the record it should be noted that this was only one in a series of philosophical works struggling with the relation between agnosticism, science, naturalism, and religion in the late-Victorian period. Another notable example is the philosopher Ferdinand S. C. Schiller, who represent an intriguing pragmatist school, similar in some respects to that of William James. His *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1894) aimed to set forth a 'philosophy of evolution', and to argue against agnosticism in its 'Kantian' and 'Spencerian' interpretations (e.g. pp. vii-ix, 16-56). Intriguingly, Huxley is not even mentioned in this work, even though agnosticism is one of its primary concerns. Schiller is also of interest here because he was a partial defender of psychical research. See e.g. Schiller, 'Some Logical Aspects of Psychical Research'.
naturalistic response to religion and supernaturalism, in fact had ended up corroding the philosophical basis of naturalism itself. To reach that conclusion, Ward relied on two assumptions, one about naturalism and the other about agnosticism. First, naturalism’s philosophical foundation was seen to be materialism; second, agnosticism was taken in its meaning of the limitation of knowledge concerning metaphysics. On these definitions, the pair becomes something of a contradiction in terms, for materialism is a metaphysical position which goes beyond mere appearances, while agnosticism presumes to limit one’s enquiry strictly to the phenomenal world. Ward thus visibly embeds his analysis in Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, but also offers a response to Hume’s radical insistence that there can be no real knowledge about anything that is neither quantifiable nor empirically verifiable.25 Both Kant and Hume are seen as originators of agnosticism in this sense, but it was the naturalists of Ward’s own century – especially Huxley, Spencer, and Tyndall – who had merged the doctrine with a materialist metaphysics. They had thus added to science a dimension of “knowable and unknowable”, which entailed a scepticism that, according to Ward, was at odds with the project of “naturalism” as he understood it:

the distinction of known and unknown, as science intends it, is, we may say, a mere objective distinction of fact; the distinction of knowable and unknowable as used by the agnostic, on the other hand, brings the knower himself to the fore, and entails an examination both of the standpoint and of the premises from which science, without any preliminary criticism, set forth. In other words, Naturalism is essentially dogmatic, whereas Agnosticism is essentially sceptical.26

Ward did not stop there, however, but stretched the point to suggest that agnosticism, in fact, seemed to lay the foundation for a revival of idealism (or “spiritualism”, which he

Moreover, Schiller’s philosophy of evolution seems to prefigure some of the later ideas of emergentism, which we have discussed previously.

25 See e.g. Ward, Naturalism and Agnosticism, 1-36. Again, many of these questions concerning agnosticism and metaphysics appear to have been prefigured in the German philosophical and theological responses to Kant’s critical philosophy around the year 1800. The exact relation between these earlier debates and the later manifestations in the context of Victorian naturalism, including not only the structural similarities, but also the unique characteristics of these different contexts, would require a substantial independent study. Cf. Pinkard, German Philosophy 1760–1860.

26 Ward, Naturalism and Agnosticism, viii.
somewhat confusingly termed it). Similar to arguments we have seen in the context of idealistic natural theologies, Ward approached this conclusion by emphasising scepticism, demanding that the philosopher starts with immediate experience and hence with consciousness and mind. In a familiar fashion, thus: ‘It is only in terms of mind that we can understand the unity, activity, and regularity that nature presents. In so understanding we see that Nature is Spirit.’

Ultimately, Ward saw this revival of idealism as a necessary first step for contending even the very possibility of theism. From the perspective of the agnostic epistemology we have considered above, however, one is still left to wonder how much value there was in such speculative arguments: even if one conceded that the possibility of theism had been proved, the agnostic would still require much more in terms of plausibility based on empirical evidence before ever converting to an actual positive position of theism. To the committed agnostic, Ward’s argument would look like little more than a play with words: fascinating and sophisticated, perhaps, but ultimately of little or no consequence.

As Frank Miller Turner has shown, Ward was part of a broader movement in late-Victorian intellectual life that contested the hard line of scientific naturalism, seeking to open it up for a religious and spiritual dimension. Among the other notable intellectuals discussed by Turner we find two of the original founders of the Society for Psychical Research, Henry Sidgwick, the professor of moral philosophy at Trinity College (who incidentally helped Ward to a position at Cambridge University, and also protested in favour of the 1871 act to get rid of religious tests at the university), and Frederic Myers, whom we have already been acquainted with in chapter six. It is notable that Myers’ Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death, the standard work of psychical research which was published at the opening of the 20th century, started off with a consideration of agnosticism in its very first chapter. However, while Ward had been moved to see agnosticism as leading, through philosophical scepticism, ultimately to idealism and a possible defence for theism, Myers, considering things from an empirical and scientific rather than a purely philosophical point of view, saw

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27 Ibid., xii.
28 Turner, Between Science and Religion.
29 For the foundation of the SPR, and biographical details on those involved, see Gauld, The Founders of Psychical Research.
agnosticism solely as an obstacle, and a dogmatic one at that. In fact, and in strict contrast to Huxley, he saw agnosticism as being adverse to the scientific method itself.

The first chapter of *Human Personality* is a defence of the project outlined by the book, namely to apply, at long last, the best route to knowledge ever developed by human kind – science – to one of the questions that has most interested humanity since the dawn of history – that of the survival of the personality after bodily death. Scientific method 'has never yet been applied to the all-important problem of the existence, the powers, the destiny of the human soul', Myers complained, and the reason for this astonishing neglect he found in “agnosticism”, broadly conceived: 'That resolutely agnostic view – I may almost say that scientific superstition – “ignoramus et ignorabimus” – is no doubt held at the present date by many learned minds.' 30 But, Myers continued, the agnostic view that no real knowledge of spiritual things could be achieved has ‘never been the creed, nor is it now the creed, of the human race generally':

In most civilised countries there has been for nearly two thousand years a distinct belief that survival has actually been proved by certain phenomena observed at a given date in Palestine. And beyond the Christian pale – whether through reason, instinct, or superstition – it has ever been commonly held that ghostly phenomena of one kind or another exist to testify to a life beyond the life we know.31

The point was not, of course, to simply reiterate the old argument from tradition, as Henry Wace had done in his debate with Huxley. Myers' point was rather to criticise the tendency, even among those who thought survival to have been demonstrated by the example of Christ, to not seek any further corroboration, but rather separate this domain of enquiry entirely from the domain of science. In Myers' own words, these people

have not sought for fresh corroborative instances, for analogies, for explanations; rather they have kept their convictions on these fundamental matters in a separate and sealed compartment of their minds, a compartment consecrated to religion or to superstition, but not to observation or to experiment.32

31 Ibid., 2.
32 Ibid.
This separation clearly reminds us of the dictums of disenchantment: religion must be separated from scientific and empirical discourse in order to be “valid”. It was, however, precisely this chasm between scientific inquiry and religious belief that Myers wanted to bridge. In fact, the whole project of psychical research depended on overcoming this divide. ‘It is my object’, Myers wrote, ‘as it has from the first been the object of the Society for Psychical Research’,

to do what can be done to break down that artificial wall of demarcation which has thus far excluded from scientific treatment precisely the problems which stand in most need of all the aids to discovery which such treatment can afford.33

Breaking down this ‘artificial wall of demarcation’ between the “natural” and the “supernatural” implied a move towards what might be called an “open-ended naturalism”. This position was based on anti-agnosticism, and, implicitly, anti-Kantianism. In order to defend such a view, however, it was also necessary to rethink the category of the “supernatural” itself. The supernatural seemed to suggest either a contrariety to nature and natural law, or a complete ontological breach from it; on these grounds it signified something which, even if it did exist, would be impossible to study in a satisfactorily fashion from the position of natural science. Myers’ solution to this problem was to dispense of the term supernatural altogether, proposing the term “supernormal” instead. As he explained:

The word supernatural is open to grave objections; it assumes that there is something outside nature, and it has become associated with arbitrary interference with law. Now there is no reason to suppose that the psychical phenomena with which we deal are less a part of nature, or less subject to fixed and definite law, than any other phenomena.34

Myers proposes a definition that moves away from the unexplainable towards the as of yet unexplained. Considered in relation to the other naturalistic sciences, the supernormal thus takes on the character of a residual category: it included everything

33 Ibid. Emphasis added.
34 Ibid., xxii.
that remained anomalous or had been pushed aside from the established fields of science, whether by neglect, stigma, or stultification. The implied understanding was, of course, that the natural sciences had missed out on something, and that current explanatory schemes were insufficient or even narrow-minded.

At this point we should consider what the exact relation is to Huxley’s brand of agnosticism. The kind of agnosticism attacked by Myers in the opening sections of *Human Personality* is, in fact, *not* exactly identical to the view defended by Huxley. The attitude of the Huxleyan agnostic to spiritualism, for example, would be pretty much the same as his attitude to demonic possession: he would be willing to concede that there is *no a priori* reason why it should not be possible *in principle* for some spirit entity to communicate through the mind and body of a living being. The analogy to parasites would be no less fitting than it had been in the case of demonic possession. The problem for the agnostic, however, would be with plausibility based on prior experience and knowledge, and the weighing of evidence in relation to those factors. The main difference between a Huxley and a Myers comes down to how they do the weighing, and what they consider, *prima facie*, to be plausible entities to find in nature. Whereas the agnostic would call for a patient suspension of judgement concerning extraordinary phenomena that appear unexplained, the psychical researchers were not afraid to start theorising and hypothesising on the assumption that things are, more or less, what they *appear* to be. They were also less concerned with restricting explanations to well-understood mechanisms, such as psychopathology, hallucination, or perceptual illusion. When Myers wrote that the supernormal comprised any ‘faculty or phenomenon which goes beyond the level of ordinary experience, in the direction of evolution, or as pertaining to a transcendental world’, he in fact opened the door for an entirely new order of explanations. This became particularly clear when he added that some psychical phenomena

appear to indicate a higher evolutionary level than the mass of men have yet attained, and some of them appear to be governed by laws of such a kind that they may hold good in a transcendental world as fully as in the world of sense. In either case they are above the norm of man rather than outside his nature.35

35 Ibid.
For Myers, then, the “supernormal” is connected to a peculiar form of evolutionism in which his whole system was imbedded. The non-apprehension of these phenomena is partially due to us viewing them from a benighted state. This idea is, in fact, reminiscent of the argument of the emergentists of the 1920s, particularly Samuel Alexander, for whom any “higher” phenomenon would be in principle unintelligible if viewed solely from “below”. In any case, it was a way to attempt to save the supernormal for an open-ended naturalism; thus, for Myers, the possibilities of naturalism were opened up by considering the potentialities of “evolution”. By emphasising that nature was changing, and claiming to be studying the cutting edge of that evolutionary movement, Myers would remain a naturalist while allowing for a broader range of phenomena to be taken seriously as part of (emerging) nature.

* * *

The battle against agnosticism has remained a recurring theme for psychical researchers, particularly through their defence of a radical and extended form of empiricism against any a priori distinctions and epistemological arguments that would threaten the field as a whole. After Myers, we find the debate again taken up by William McDougall in the 1920s. Significantly, McDougall’s attack on the agnostic principle was part of a campaign to make psychical research a professional branch of science, embedded in university structures. That quest will occupy us at length in chapter nine; at present, however, we should note that McDougall’s anti-agnosticism was even

36 See my discussion in chapter six.
37 In reference to my discussion of different evolutionary schemes in a previous chapter, it is not altogether clear what kind of evolutionary conception Myers was really following. As such his writings on the topic are characteristic of the early phase of the so-called “eclipse of Darwinism”. What is evident is that Myers’ position is not Darwinian, and too early to be Mendelian. There seem to be some elements of orthogenesis, and certain hints at Lamarckism: Myers stresses the continuity of evolution, and seems able to suggest concrete courses of future evolution by observing so-called “degenerates” (e.g. those suffering from “nervous” and “hysterical” disorders) – some of whom he suggests might better be seen as “protoprogenerates”, since their mental abnormalities may point towards certain higher functions that will become the ‘norm of man’ in the future. Myers linked this future path of evolution to an uprush from the subliminal to the supraliminal region of the mind (see especially Myers, Human Personality, vol. I, chapter III). Evolutionary speaking, these ideas seem to suggest an underlying orthogenetic theory of unilinear, even “progressive” evolution. Compare with figure 7 at the end of chapter five.
38 See Asprem, ‘A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies’.
stronger and more polemical in tone than Myers' had been a quarter of a century earlier. Any opposition to psychical research, McDougall argued, must arise from narrow dogmatic ignorance, that higher kind of ignorance which so often goes with a wealth of scientific knowledge, the ignorance which permits a man to lay down dogmatically the boundaries of our knowledge and to exclaim "ignorabimus." This cry – "we shall not, cannot know!" – is apt to masquerade as scientific humility, while, in reality, it expresses an unscientific arrogance and philosophic incompetence.39

In McDougall’s view, agnosticism taken as a methodological principle for academic research is to be viewed merely as a 'higher kind of ignorance', which tries to authoritatively enforce its rigid boundaries of what can possibly be known. Once again, however, the kind of agnosticism that comes under attack is different from that initially formulated by Huxley. What McDougall attacks is the kind of agnosticism that withdraws “the supernatural” from the “natural”, and states dogmatically (or by recourse to the a priori) that the former is by definition unreachable, ineffable, and transcendent. Again, the distinction is crucial because it separates the question of what we do not know from what we cannot know. It is the claim that we cannot know – ignorabimus rather than ignoramus – that McDougall detests. Indeed, he seems to be speaking with all the epistemic optimism of the Victorian naturalists when he continues to state that

To cry ignorabimus in face of the problems of Psychical Research, and to refuse on that ground to support or countenance its labour, is disingenuous camouflage; for the assertion that we shall not and cannot know the answers to these problems implies a knowledge which we certainly have not yet attained and which, if in principle is attainable, lies in the distant future when the methods of Psychical Research shall have been systematically developed and worked for all they may be worth. The history of Science is full of warnings against such dogmatic agnosticism, the agnosticism which does not concern itself with the frank and humble avowal that we do not know, but which presumes to assert that we cannot know.40

40 Ibid., 154.
Dismissing psychical research on *a priori* grounds is thus to deny its research programme a chance to prove itself. If, after continued efforts to investigate psychical phenomena, one still could not say anything definite about them, *then* it would be legitimate to speculate about epistemological boundaries – but not before. Quite contrary to the transcendental critical philosophy of Kant and his followers, the question of where the boundaries of natural knowledge are to be drawn is *itself* an empirical matter, to be settled through scientific trial and error. In fact, this was the only truly scientific and truly empirical manner of proceeding, and it is clear that McDougall was employing a “more scientific than thou”-tactic against his academic opponents. ‘Dogmatic agnosticism’, on his reading, already assumed a conclusion to the very questions which psychical research wanted to ask.

With McDougall urging this point in 1927, it is worth noting that even a leading spokesperson obviously did not consider psychical research to be an established or “mature” science at that point. It had not led to significant results, and its theories and classifications were not yet sophisticated enough to be taken seriously by other fields. While this was the verdict of a prominent second-generation scholar, the founding generation had also stressed that psychical research was an infant discipline, which could not yet be expected to compete with its fully fledged and mature siblings. 41 Myers had even described psychical research as a kind of proto-science, to be compared with other pre-scientific endeavours that had only much later grown into proper scientific fields:

... by the word “scientific” I signify an authority to which I submit myself – not a standard which I claim to attain. Any science of which I can here speak as possible must be a *nascent* science – not such as one of those vast systems of connected knowledge which thousands of experts now steadily push forward in laboratories in every land – but such as each one of those great sciences was in its dim and poor beginning, when a few monks groped among the properties of “the noble metals” or a few Chaldean shepherds outwatched the setting stars. 42

Still a ‘dim and poor’ proto-science, psychical research could only attempt to blossom by demanding that the gates at nature’s borders not be closed prematurely.

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41 See the following chapter for a periodization of the development of psychical research into three distinct generations.

3 Strategies of Naturalisation

If contesting agnosticism in the context of psychical research meant adopting a naturalistic approach to phenomena such as spiritualism, there was still a plethora of different strategies to choose from in order to achieve such a naturalisation in practice. These strategies would involve different and sometimes mutually exclusive hypotheses about the phenomena in question. In the present section I shall attempt a broad classification of such naturalisation strategies, briefly exemplify them, and look at their relation to each other.

We may distinguish between three main types of naturalisation in psychical research. Staying close to terminology that had become established by the end of the 19th century, these may be called “spiritualistic”, “animistic”, and “reductionist” strategies. The distinction between “animists” and “spiritualists” was particularly noticeable in German psychical research in the 1890s; it was, for example, put forward as such in Aleksandr Aksakov’s *Animismus und Spiritismus* – essentially a polemical defence of the latter against the “animist” psychical researcher and philosopher Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906). In this context, “spiritualism” refers to the “spirit hypothesis” of mediumism, construed here as a naturalising approach that allows for the existence and activity of disembodied spirits within nature. Reference to such spirits are then used to explain the most extravagant phenomena of spiritualism, as well as phantoms, ghosts, haunted houses, and related phenomena. This position is practically inseparable from the rhetoric of the spiritualist movement itself, being a position that the more scientifically minded adherents of spiritualism would profess. Indeed, as Richard Noakes has shown, a “naturalistic spiritualism” along these lines was propounded by some of the most influential spiritualist spokespersons, such as William Henry Harrisson, the editor of one of the movement’s most successful journals, the *Spiritualist* (founded 1869). The only thing needed for it to count as a naturalistic strategy, was to insist that the activity of spirits can somehow happen in accordance with natural law.

43 For the German context of this debate, see Wolfram, *Stepchildren of Science*, 33-71.
By contrast to the spiritualist hypothesis, *animism* denotes a strategy that seeks the origin of psychical phenomena in the organism of human beings – whether through the use of extraordinary faculty by especially “gifted” persons, or through spontaneous cases in ordinary people. This line of naturalisation is obviously still outside the pale of mainstream scientific knowledge, but moves somewhat closer to scientific plausibility structures by disregarding the action of spirits and focusing instead on the activities of this-worldly organisms. It moves in the direction of biology and psychology, with obvious links to the vitalistic strands of those disciplines. Finally, *reductionism* refers to two different kinds of strategies. The first type may be called “positive”, in that it considers most of the cases of psychical research to be genuine, but proceeds by suggesting specific lower-level mechanism at work behind the phenomena. The classic example of positive reductionism in this sense is the brain-wave hypothesis of telepathy. Finally, the second type of reductionism is “negative”, and amounts to reducing away the phenomena entirely. This naturalistic strategy would explain the phenomena as illusory, holding that they are really the result of some other and well-known phenomenon, such as trickery, illusion, hallucination, psychopathology, psychological bias, or a combination of such factors. This latter form of reductionism was the official naturalist line, and the line of Huxley’s agnosticism, as we have seen it expressed earlier in this chapter. I will suggest that the supreme irony of the psychical researchers’ stress on a naturalisation of the supernatural is that it led to a direct confrontation with this particular kind of sceptical agnosticism. Indeed, naturalisation based on a negative reductionist strategy is associated with psychical research’s most persistent enemy: the “scientific skeptic”.

All these naturalisation strategies are found within the psychical research community from its inception, and have continued to compete for dominance throughout the 20th century (see figure 9). Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive: it is possible for a researcher to explain some phenomena away as trickery, while reserving genuineness for others. As a rule, however, the field moved away from the spiritualist hypothesis, and has generally centred on forms of animism during the period that concerns us the most. The exact way in which these strategies and explanatory models were connected to social formations, research practices, contests with other scientific disciplines, and attempts to professionalise psychical research will
be explored in the following two chapters. At present, we should aim to exemplify some of these positions, and trace the patterns of their evolution.

### Figure 9: Naturalisation strategies in psychical research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritualist</th>
<th>Animist</th>
<th>Reductionist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirits active in the natural world; expansion of natural borders.</td>
<td>Unknown properties of the (human) organism responsible for psychic phenomena; non-mechanical vitalistic forces.</td>
<td>Phenomena explained by underlying mechanisms; e.g. brain-waves; electromagnetic fields.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. R. Wallace</td>
<td>von Schrenck-Notzing</td>
<td>T. H. Huxley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O. Lodge (late period)</td>
<td>H. Driesch</td>
<td>U. Sinclair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W. McDougall</td>
<td>H. Houdini</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomena explained by underlying mechanisms; e.g. brain-waves; electromagnetic fields.</td>
<td>Phenomena are illusory; reduced to trickery, fraud, bias, psychopathology.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An early work pointing the way towards psychical research is found in the famous naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace’s (1823–1913) *Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* (1866), which, as the subtitle of the book suggests, argued for ‘an experimental enquiry by men of science into the alleged powers of clairvoyants and mediums’. The booklet defended a variety of the naturalised spirit hypothesis. Wallace, best known today as co-inventor of the Darwinian theory of selection, argued in this short work that there should be no objections in principle against the postulation of intelligences beyond the ordinary knowledge sphere of humanity. Making an analogy to recent discoveries in biology of forms of life so small that no-one had previously seen them, Wallace argued that there might be living entities not discoverable by the ordinary senses, or with surprising physical properties that have so far eluded scientific observation. At the same time, thitherto undiscovered laws of nature might govern what seemed like “supernatural” events, making them instead instances of not-yet-

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discovered natural features. Wallace thus suggested that spiritualism might teach us that nature includes much more life and agency than previously thought.

We also recognise a form of this strategy in Oliver Lodge’s later ether metaphysics. Lodge’s concept of “ether bodies” was especially designed to create a space within the natural world where spiritual activity could take place without being contrary to natural law. His system suggested that all mental activity and all animation of life in fact happens through the ether, and that one might therefore expect to find disembodied mental and vital activity on the etheric plane – sometimes interacting with ordinary tangible matter. As already suggested, we might also find Myers within this category, although his efforts to systematise the whole of psychical research led him to a position which covers much more than the spiritualist hypothesis alone. What is clear is that survival after death is thought possible in Myers’ system, and moreover explicable within an open-ended naturalistic framework.

The spiritualist hypothesis enjoyed a revival in the aftermath of the Great War, both within psychical research and among the broader public. As we shall see in the next chapter, a controversy concerning the spiritualist hypothesis led to complete fragmentation in American psychical research in the 1920s, where spiritualists such as Lodge and Arthur Conan Doyle had won over some of the SPR communities, while scepticism was on the rise, bolstered, no doubt, by America’s most popular debunker, the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini. In the middle of all this, however, animist strategies were adopted by the more scientifically minded parts of the psychical research community, both in the United States and in Europe. These strategies were typically connected with the neo-vitalism vogue that we have discussed at some length in previous chapters. The main animists were no doubt Hans Driesch and William McDougall, both of whom connected parapsychological abilities with vitalistic functions of the human organism and psyche. Other animists were less philosophically inclined; notably, the “spirit baron” Alfred von Schrenck-Notzing of Munich held an animistic theory to be the best for explaining the excretion of ectoplasm from his mediums’ bodies during his laboratory experiments, and for paranormal feats in general.47

46 Cf. my discussion of Lodge’s ether metaphysics in chapter six. A variety of this line of speculation was already available in Balfour Stewart and P. G. Tait’s The Unseen Universe (1875).

47 Cf. Wolffram, 131-189. See also my discussion in the next chapter.
While animism did stress that the phenomena observed were in accordance with naturalistic principles, the vitalistic stance typically meant that they were at odds with mechanistic explanations. Indeed, for both Driesch and McDougall, the animistic strategy of interpreting parapsychological effects became part of the evidential basis for a more general case against the mechanistic philosophy as such, particularly as employed to the study of life and mind. For these authors, the phenomena of psychical research were not merely strange “freaks of nature”, but rather became the purest and thus most illustrative examples of the uniqueness and irreducibility of life. By stressing animism as a naturalising strategy (and thus remaining aloof to the category of the “supernatural”), they sought to redefine the frameworks for understanding nature as such – at the expense of mechanism and in the direction of neo-vitalism and organicism.

Another naturalising strategy that has returned time and again within psychical research and in the popular consciousness is the “positive” reductionist approach of postulating fundamental physical mechanisms that would “explain” the phenomena observed. This strategy is at odds with the animistic one primarily in that it tends to rest on mechanism, and, moreover, usually appeals to physics where the animist appeals to biology and psychology. Thus, for example, the single most popular line of explanation was born squarely from Maxwellian field theory in the 1880s, when Oliver Lodge made his first attempt at explaining “thought-transference” through the supposition of “brain waves” transmitted through electromagnetic fields of thought in the ether surrounding the brain. This line of explanation was fleshed out further by William Crookes (1892), E. J. Houston (1892) and J. Knowles (1899), but by 1900, it rapidly lost most of its credence, and became much less popular among scientifically minded psychical researchers in early decades of the 20th century. In the popular literature surrounding psychical research, however, it has remained very influential, as seen for example in the American journalist and novelist Upton Sinclair’s hugely successful Mental Radio (1930).

The problem with the brain-wave hypothesis was that it ran into certain purely experimental anomalies that it was unable to explain. Judging from the experimental evidence for thought-transference that had piled up in the decades prior to 1900, there seemed to be no correspondence between the distance of the communicating minds and the accuracy of the effect. This was troublesome to physicists and philosophers with an understanding of classical mechanics, because it violated the inverse-square law: the force of any physical effect should be inversely proportionate to the square of the...
distance from its source. If telepathy was indeed an electromagnetic phenomenon, explainable within the framework of Maxwellian field theory, its effect would be expected to decrease with distance. By the early 1900s the leading physicists of the SPR were forced to conclude on this basis that telepathy was just as badly in need of an explanation as any spiritualist hypothesis; it did not behave as a mechanical phenomenon, hence brain-waves could not be the explanation.\textsuperscript{48} The explanatory failure of the brain-wave theory helped facilitate, at least temporarily, a new regard for the spiritualist hypothesis, as well as inciting interest in the less reductionist animistic theories. However, it also became a serious point of criticism from sceptics. Thus, for example, Albert Einstein, who had originally contributed a short prefatory note to Upton Sinclair's \textit{Mental Radio}, cautiously commending the research while not committing himself to the author's conclusions, referred to this problem in two letters to the psychiatrist Jan Ehrenwald – published much later by the American mathematician and sceptic Martin Gardner.\textsuperscript{49} In these letters, responding to the famous results produced by Joseph Banks Rhine in a later phase of psychical research, Einstein drew attention to the lack of a decline with distance. This was a suspicious feature, in and in his opinion suggestive that the consistent positive results were due to some undiscovered methodical error. In his second letter, Einstein supported this claim by noting how a seemingly insignificant methodical error could, in fact, lead to very significant artefacts in this type of statistical experiments.\textsuperscript{50}

These considerations lead us to the final type of naturalising strategy, namely that which I termed “negative” reductionism. Examples of this strategy are found among the mainliners of Victorian naturalism, in the writings of scientist such as Huxley and Maudsley. The physiologist and zoologist William Benjamin Carpenter (1813–1885) took the discourse of morbidity even further, accounting for spiritualism in terms of ‘epidemic delusions’, spreading through certain erroneous ‘dominant ideas’ that activated automatic mental reflexes and control of motor responses.\textsuperscript{51} These naturalist


\textsuperscript{51} Cf. Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Scence and the Supernatural', 31-32.
authors generally appealed to psychopathology, malobservation, suggestion, bias, and so forth, as seen in the case of Maudsley. In the 20th century, this line of scepticism was taken up by professional psychologists. Joseph Jastrow’s *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (1900) was an important title for the continuation of this discourse in the 20th century. It started off with chapters on ‘The Modern Occult’ (which included Theosophy, spiritualism, and Christian Science, but also alchemy, astrology, phrenology, and other “pseudo-sciences”), continued with ‘The Problems of Psychical Research’ and ‘Mental Telegraphy’, before moving into ‘The Psychology of Deception’, and numerous chapters on psychological biases, perceptual illusions, hypnotic suggestion, involuntary muscle movement, and so on. The book became the foundation work of an emerging “psychology of the occult”, which presented a whole arsenal of hypotheses to promote a complete reduction of alleged supernatural phenomena.52 Needless to say, this stream of thought became extremely influential on later critics of psychical research and parapsychology, and continues to be one of the pillars of the contemporary “skeptics’ movement”.53

Another strong tradition of scepticism towards psychical research came from a less scientific source: stage magic. As it turned out, no-one was better equipped to advance the hypothesis of fraud than those who had made it their profession to work with illusions and trickery. The stage magicians had, of course, also their professional stakes at risk in competition with spiritualist mediums – thus it became a standard part of magicians’ repertoire to show how spiritualists merely dressed up the same tricks in a guise of supernaturalism. In fact, it is hardly coincidental that the stage magicians involved themselves in this quarrel with spiritualism at the same time as their trade was going through a phase of professionalization, attempting to heighten the prestige of this traditionally “low-culture” practice. Thus, one of the pioneers of stage magic’s transition from low-culture juggling to gentleman’s fashion, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin

52 For a discussion of this trend in Germany, see Wolffram, *Stepchildren of Science*, 263-294.
53 Among contemporary psychologists working in this tradition, linking psychological research to criticism of parapsychology and related currents, we can mention Ray Hyman, whose *The Elusive Quarry* (1989) is a standard work for criticisms of modern parapsychology, and Richard Wiseman, who has written books such as *Quirkology* (2007) and *Paranormality* (2010), exploring the science of perceptual errors, biases, and illusions, applied to explaining parapsychological and “supernatural” beliefs, and intended for a broader non-academic public.
(1805–1871), was involved with the debunking of modern mediums and “traditional” miracle workers – including a famous exposé of Sufi marabouts in Algeria.\(^{54}\) In Britain, the high profile stage magician John Neville Maskelyne (1839–1917) was well known for debunking mediums, publishing a book exposing the main conjuring tricks used in spiritualist performances in 1876.\(^{55}\) In the early 20\(^{th}\) century, Harry Houdini (Erik Weisz, 1874–1926) famously made a career out of debunking spiritualists in America, with much publicity and to the irritation of certain spiritualist-friendly psychical researchers.\(^{56}\) His exposé of the Boston medium “Margery” (Mina Crandon, 1888–1941) in 1924 was particularly devastating, since the SPR had invested much prestige in this particular case.\(^{57}\) Indeed, it had attracted much media attention after the journal *Scientific American*, then led by pro-spiritualist editor J. Malcolm Bird (1886–1964), had set down a committee to investigate her, with a prize of $2,500 to be awarded if she passed the test.\(^{58}\) The committee decided she did not, even though Bird himself prematurely published an enthusiastic report without informing the committee members. Shortly after the affair, Bird resigned from *Scientific American*, and took up work for the American Society of Psychical Research instead.\(^{59}\)

Whether relying on references to psychopathology, or the exposition of fraud, or even the *suggestion* of how a certain phenomenon *could* be produced through methods found in the stage magicians’ book of tricks, the point for the negative reductionist strategy was that well-tested mechanisms which can account for the observed phenomena ought to be preferred to explanations invoking new mysteries. And, one

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\(^{54}\) See e.g. Michael Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, 102-115.

\(^{55}\) Maskelyne, *Modern Spiritualism*. On the history of stage magic in Britain, see Michael Bailey, *The Magic Circle*.

\(^{56}\) See e.g. Houdini, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods* (1920); idem, *A Magician among the Spirits* (1924).

\(^{57}\) Houdini, *Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium “Margery” to Win the $2500 Price Offered by the Scientific American*. See also the full review of the Margery case written for the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1926: Walter Franklin Prince, ‘A Review of the Margery Case’.

\(^{58}\) For the statements of the committee, including Bird’s positive review of the case, see Bird (ed.), *The Margery Mediumship*. The relative value of the promised prize money comes to $434,000 by 2011 standards, if we are assessing the relative economic power of the money. Calculated using measuringworth.com.

\(^{59}\) See, e.g., John Beloff, *Parapsychology*, 111. We shall discuss the circumstances of this historically very significant case in more detail in the coming chapters.
might add, the reductionist equally abhorred mysteries of this world (such as otherwise unknown vitalistic principles, or unsupportable claims about brain-waves) as the mysteries of another. It is particularly in the meeting between the negative reductionist strategy and the other purportedly naturalised explanations of psychic phenomena that psychical research became a veritable battle over the boundaries of natural knowledge. It was here, moreover, that the boundary between enchantment and disenchantment was truly drawn.

4 Conclusion: Anti-Agnosticism and the Slippery Road to Psychic Enchantments
One wonders whether Myers, when he accused sundry modern believers of insulating their cherished beliefs from the realm of science and empirical enquiry, saw all the possible implications of his daring proposal. Having looked in some detail at the precise meaning of Huxley's original formulation of agnosticism at the opening of this chapter, and then seen what psychical researchers generally attacked when they lashed out at “agnostics”, it is tempting to conclude that he did not. The anti-agnosticism of psychical research took issue with certain epistemological distinctions that presumed to set forth what can and cannot be known through empirical investigation. The agnosticism they attacked was inseparable from the sceptical dimensions of disenchantment, as analysed in chapter one: the strict boundary drawn between the domain of science and the domains of values and metaphysics, which led Weber to call for an intellectual sacrifice on behalf of the modern religious believer. When it comes to the optimistic dimension of disenchantment (concerning the dissipation of mystery and possibility of exact knowledge), one has to say that psychical researchers not only kept it more or less intact, but expanded its scope. Complete knowledge of this world is possible, and this world contains many things that have hitherto been considered mysteries, but are now at long last put under the careful scrutiny of science. The discipline's anti-agnosticism, construed as an open-ended naturalism, refused the intellectual sacrifice by claiming that nature was broader and richer than previously thought. Rational knowledge could thus be gained about realities which had previously been considered either non-existent, or else completely distinct from this world. By extension, science could reach beyond the phenomenal (thus entering metaphysics), and ultimately beyond the strictly factual (crouching in on axiology).
Psychical research, in short, meant a refusal to do natural philosophy along the disenchanted lines of Kantian epistemology. The call for a naturalisation of the supernatural is in this sense also a naturalisation of the problem of disenchantment itself: the very borders that were thought to separate this world from higher worlds were themselves opened up for scientific investigation. Perhaps the worlds were not separate at all, or perhaps, as Myers seemed to suggest, humanity already possessed or was in the process of developing perceptual organs and faculties of thought that made it possible to pierce the veil of this world and see lucidly in higher realms. At any rate, the boundaries of knowledge could not be drawn a priori. They could only be established by empirical investigation.

There are two ironies about this approach. The first of these was already hinted to above: expanding scientific knowledge to penetrate those realms that had previously been isolated by an impenetrable epistemological boundary would, if successful, mean that more “mysterious forces” were explained and tamed. Nature may have been opened up, but if psychical research should succeed to create explanatory frameworks that told the scientific community how all the exotic occult phenomena truly worked, it would be no less “disenchanted”. This conclusion could, however, be challenged, depending on which kind of naturalisation strategy was opted for. If the final explanation of psychic phenomena would be in terms of irreducible vitalistic forces, setting things in motion and driving evolution towards new and unknown territories, that would be a decidedly more “enchanted” explanatory framework than one produced by positive reductionist strategies referring to “fluids”, “fields”, “waves”, or “rays”.

A second and more serious irony is that the anti-agnosticism of Myers was, in reality, not all that far away from Huxley’s original agnosticism. Huxley’s agnostic position had also argued the naturalisation of most things supernatural – it had just been a different kind of naturalisation than the one Myers and colleagues wanted to pursue. The Huxleyan agnostic was a naturalistic doubter; a fierce sceptic, a critic of all claims that could be given a factual interpretation, accepting no authority except that of nature and the store of natural knowledge. Calling the heavens down to earth did not mean instant enchantment: it was welcomed by an army of naturalistic doubters, armed to the teeth with diagnostic manuals and magicians’ books of tricks. The point is this: while it seemed to Myers and the psychical researchers that no religious options in the modern world could overlook and ignore the authority of science, the fearless call for
Empiricism also led to an open confrontation with contrary evidence. Breaching the border between science and religion means that religious claims must be open for disconfirmation in the exact same way as any other claim not graced with the cloak of sanctity and thus left untouchable.

The road to psychic enchantments was thus a slippery one. A close dialogue with the empirical sciences was necessary if anything of the sort was to be established in the first place, but this manoeuvre simultaneously left a flank wide open for well-prepared attacks. The very philosophical assumptions that were necessary for the project to get started contained within themselves the seeds of its future antagonisms. This has remained a central paradox in the history of psychical research ever since.