

# Transgressing Boundaries: Magic and Rationalism in Two Renaissance Philosophers

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*On scholarly habitus*

Every academic discipline has its characteristic questions, its methods, and its own ways to come to grips with its subject matter.<sup>1</sup> Some of these are determined by empirical limitations: prehistory cannot be studied with the same text-critical methods that are available for historical studies. Others are determined by what Pierre Bourdieu called ‘habitus’, a term he defined succinctly as “dispositions to a certain practice”.<sup>2</sup> Other writings of his allow us to unpack this definition as a reference to a collective and often unconscious consensus that every field develops. The present article addresses three aspects of the habitus of historiography of philosophy and of Christian culture.

The first habitus concerns the developmentalist presuppositions of much scholarship. The Belgian-American physicist George Sarton (1884–1956) is generally regarded as the founder of the history of science as a field of academic study. By establishing a journal (*Isis*, first published in 1913), founding a learned society (*The History of Science Society*, 1924), and publishing a number of highly regarded books, not least *The History of Science and the New Humanism* (1931), he was instrumental in creating a new discipline. Since he was a scientist educated in an era marked by positivism, he also bequeathed a distinct scholarly habitus to the new field of study. Historians of ideas were to study those innovations that posterity has found useful. It would be pointless, he felt, to write a history of irrationality and superstition. Only in the last few

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a lecture given on December 17, 2004, to a joint audience of scholars of philosophy and of religion at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Southern Denmark. The introductory nature and informal tone of the lecture has been retained in the written version.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (London: Polity 1994), p. 77

decades has the investigation of what James Webb called “rejected knowledge” become a relatively accepted topic.<sup>3</sup>

The two subjects that will be the concern of this article, i.e. the history of philosophy and of Christian culture, have been similarly influenced by rationalist norms. The past is studied less for what it was, than for what it has become for us. Scholarship on magical practices and beliefs is a case in point. The arguably most influential Renaissance philosopher was the Florentine Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). It seems more than coincidental that those portions of his works that have been least palatable to modern sensibilities are those that have, until very recently, been largely marginalized. Ficino’s main treatise on magic, *De vita coelitus comparanda*, was translated into English 500 years after the publication of the *editio princeps* in 1498. The classic study of Ficino’s philosophy, Paul Oskar Kristeller’s 440 page monograph, mentions it only in passing.<sup>4</sup> The index to Kristeller’s book has one single reference to the topic of magic.<sup>5</sup> Another core topic of Ficino’s, astrology, fares somewhat better, but not much. Two pages are devoted to the Florentine philosopher’s complex attitudes to the controversial subject.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, the literature that in the 1950s and 1960s did begin to deal with the topic, divorced magic from philosophy and studied Ficino’s statements on the topic as if they constituted isolated interests, largely separate from the rest of his oeuvre.<sup>7</sup> In Frances Yates classic study, Ficino comes across as a larger-than-life *magus*, not a philosopher.

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<sup>3</sup> James Webb, *The Occult Underground*, (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 1974), p. 191. Among the exceptions to the rule a particular mention should be made of Lynn Thorndike *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 8 vols., 1913-28 and several later printings), a monumental – albeit with the passage of time largely superseded – repository of information on magic and esotericism in pre-modern Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeller *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith 1964), p. 18 et passim.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p. 314

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*. p. 310-312

<sup>7</sup> The specialist studies are those by D.P. Walker and Frances Yates; see Frances Yates *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), D.P. Walker *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute 1958) and Wayne Schumaker *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

The historiography of Christianity has been heavily influenced by similar scholarly predilections. Few Christian writers have been so extensively studied as Augustine of Hippo. Few Augustinian topics have been so understudied as his incorporation and reinterpretation, via Platonic sources, of neo-Pythagorean number symbolism.<sup>8</sup> Again, it is tempting to suppose that a subject that was of considerable importance to Augustine himself is passed by in relative silence because it is not important for us.

The second habitus is essentialism, a view of traditions and currents as *sui generis* entities, an understanding repudiated by numerous scholars in theory but adopted by many in practice. We are tempted to study units that were demarcated for us as separate domains by our intellectual forebears, items with such labels as “philosophy”, “religion”, “Christianity”, and so forth. Many such demarcations are either recent constructions, unhelpful distinctions, or both.

The distinction between “religion” and “philosophy” is a case in point. Until quite recently, the vast majority of philosophers were in their writings either religious or explicitly anti-religious. In European history, one is hard pressed to find distinctly non-religious philosophers, i.e. writers who simply ignored religious subjects, before the turn of the 20th century. Only when idealism went out of fashion and philosophy increasingly began to deal with topics such as mathematical logic, did the distinction between the two domains become a sharp border. In this respect, a philosopher such as Gottlob Frege does come across as a true innovator.

Once again, specific historical forces have contributed in shaping our pre-theoretical reflex to understand the two domains religion and philosophy as essentially distinct. Two formative historical moments in particular can be identified.

The first is the high Middle Ages, when Aristotelians in particular attempted to protect their scholarly freedom by declaring philosophy and religion to be separate entities, governed by essentially different rules of

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<sup>8</sup> For this particular facet of Augustinian thought, see e.g. Jean-Pierre Brach *La symbolique des nombres*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994).

inquiry. Theology was the study of definitive, revealed truths, as handed down through Scripture. Philosophy was the intellectual elaboration of possible hypotheses. Considerable freedom of speculation was granted those writers who managed to keep this distinction between religious certainty and philosophical speculation clear in their writings. The *disputatio*, that eminently medieval genre, allowed thinkers to experiment with Aristotelian, Averroist, nominalist and skeptical arguments concerning subjects such as the immortality of the soul, the eternity of the created world and the veracity of miracles. Thirteenth and early fourteenth century philosophers such as Siger of Brabant (ca 1240 – ca 1282), Boethius of Dacia (fl. ca 1270) and John of Jandun (ca 1285 – 1328) pushed the limits of allowable speculation to considerable lengths. Philosophy can for instance only conclude that matter has existed eternally, since the only forces operative in nature are generation and corruption, to the exclusion of any creation *ex nihilo*. The truth of faith, that God created the world, may be undeniable, but it is not demonstrable by argumentation.

Boethius of Dacia deserves a particular mention in this context as a main intellectual architect behind the separation of intellectual inquiry into distinct domains. In several writings he developed the idea that various scholarly disciplines are autonomous spheres, in which distinct methods must be used.

The second historical moment is early Romanticism. Whereas the previous distinction between religion and other modes of inquiry protected philosophical inquiry from theological censure, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century drawing of boundaries was specifically intended to protect religion, by declaring it to be a unique sphere of existence, immune from rational scrutiny. The architect behind this distinction is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). In his *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (“On Religion: Addresses to Its Cultured Despisers”) published in 1799, he discusses and rejects two views of religion that were current at the time. On the one hand, it was suggested that religion consisted of factual beliefs. On the other, religion could be understood as a system of ethics. Schleiermacher redefined religion in the mode of pre-Romantic thinkers, by stressing the roles of feeling and individual experience. Criticisms of religion for not being consistent with an

emerging scientific world-view, or for not being conducive to moral behavior, could thereby be construed as irrelevant, since such attacks did not concern “true religion” but merely dogmas and outward appearances. Religion, on this view, constitutes a domain of its own, separate from knowledge and morality. To find genuine religion, one needs to look inside one’s own consciousness, where one will discover a feeling of dependence, as a finite individual, of a greater whole. Reflected upon, this feeling of dependence is the essence of religion since it generates the idea of God.

Both the medieval and the Romantic dichotomies between religion and philosophy are predicated on the third of our three kinds of habitus, namely that “religion” is implicitly to be taken as the Christian tradition, as normatively defined by theological discourse. Although there are notoriously many definitions of religion, a more theologically neutral understanding is that the term refers to the sum total of communicative acts and practices that refer to whatever a given group states to be a non-empirical, absolute or sacred order of existence. Scholarship which limits itself to an a priori assumption that a historiography and a philosophy of religion must be coterminous with investigating those discourses which invoke Christian divinities, is tacitly giving its assent to a crypto-theological, ideological construction. Those writers who use concepts drawn from Greek or Roman mythology, or from astrology and magic, are by any neutral definition also constructing a religious discourse. Where traditional historiography focuses on normative Christianity, the alternative view acknowledges the plurality of religious options existing at any given time.

To summarize: traditional ways of constructing boundaries between religion and philosophical inquiry, and between Christianity and its religious others, are ideologically motivated emic constructs that scholarship in no way needs to accept. Competing with the developmentalist, the essentialist and the Christianity-centered habitus is an alternative way of looking at intellectual history. At any given point in history, people have had available to them a vast

and heterogeneous pool of cultural resources.<sup>9</sup> In particular, they have had access, via older written sources, via material remains, or from their contemporaries, to a diverse repertoire of discourses and practices useful in formulating “religious” innovations. New ideas and new practices are to a very large extent constructed by selectively picking elements from this pool of resources, and by using, interpreting and combining them in a creative way. Thus new discourses arise, describing familiar “religious” or “philosophical” topics: the place of human beings in the grand scheme of things, the nature of evil, life after death, solutions to practical problems, and so forth. Utterly innovative thinking, of course, contributes as a second component in this process. A case can, however, be made for the claim that such completely novel impulses are quite rare.

Whereas the history of philosophy, even more than the history of religions, has often been written from a perspective which emphasizes systematic thought, rationality and coherence, the alternative historiography borrows from developments in the social sciences of the 1990s and focuses on the hybrid or creolized nature of most discourses. Individual concepts, specific expressions, terms and practices, particular interpretations and selections from the pool of resources may be characterized by epithets such as Aristotelian or Platonist, Christian or “pagan”, philosophical or religious, scientific or speculative, mystical or rationalist, literal or metaphorical, monotheist or pantheist, syncretistic or purist, innovative or traditional. It is much less obvious that such epithets can be meaningfully applied to entire texts, corpora of writings, or to entire lineages and traditions. Discourses and practices are generally built by means of a *bricolage* from many sources.

This anti-essentialist stance will here be illustrated by means of a symptomatic reading of two nearly contemporaneous texts, one by Ficino, one by his somewhat younger compatriot Pietro Pomponazzi. The fact that both were philosophers, Italian Renaissance authors, and writers with a Christian background, says relatively little. Pomponazzi and Averroës shared preoccupations that united them across such demarcations as “Christian” and

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<sup>9</sup> The term is borrowed from David Eickelman & James Piscatori *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

“Muslim”, “medieval” or “renaissance”. Ficino draws on predecessors such as the neo-Platonic philosopher of theurgy Iamblichus, in ways that are obscured by labels such as “Christian” or “pagan”. Ficino and Pomponazzi, each in their very different ways, were polytheistic monotheists, unorthodox Christians, astrological philosophers and magical rationalists.

The anti-christocentric, pluralist perspective on both writers brings out the focus of the religiosity of both writers. Although writing in a Christian world and for readers who would identify themselves as Christians, both Ficino and Pomponazzi are effectively theoreticians of magic.

The anti-developmentalism of this view of history is apparent in the contrast between their two models of magic. Whereas Ficino’s magic operates in a world that is enchanted and alive, Pomponazzi’s perspective is mechanical and disenchanting. Following Max Weber, the move into a disenchanted world is often seen as a decisive step into modernity. The very fact that Pomponazzi wrote his treatise on magic in 1520 should divest us of any such illusion. As we will come to see, Pomponazzi is a thoroughly pre-modern author, who is convinced of the efficacy of incantations and prayers, of seemingly miraculous cures and of a host of other wondrous events. What separates him from Ficino is the fact that Pomponazzi manages to disenchant magic itself. Rather than being merely uninteresting sidelines in the increasing rationalization of the Western mind, magic, astrology and other religious practices scorned by the intellectual elite appear to be as mutable and as historically specific as such entities as “science” and “Christianity”.

*Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and De vita coelitus comparanda*

In Ficino’s world, philosophy appears to have been something quite different than what modern readers might make of the term. An anecdote relates how Ficino’s patron, a seriously ailing Cosimo de Medici, called for his protégé to come to his bedside.<sup>10</sup> Over a period of twelve days in 1464, as Cosimo lay dying, Ficino read to him from two of Plato’s dialogues, the *Parmenides* and *Philebus*, which he had newly translated into Latin. Consoled by the wise words

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<sup>10</sup> James Hankins *Plato in the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1990) vol 1 p. 267-8.

of the Greek philosopher, Cosimo “was recalled from this shadow of life and approached the heavenly light”.<sup>11</sup>

Scripture was commonly used in this way, as a source of spiritual solace at the moment of death. James Hankins’ careful source-critical reading of this event shows that Ficino, although he may have embellished the details of the story, did in fact use Plato in an analogous manner. Ficino’s ritualistic use of the Platonic dialogues matches the place he gives Plato in his view of history. In the *argumentum* or preface to his translation of the Corpus Hermeticum, published the year before Cosimo’s death, Ficino succinctly argues that spiritual wisdom was passed on from one ancient sage to another, beginning with Hermes Trismegistus.

He [Hermes] was succeeded by Orpheus, who came second among ancient theologians. Aglaophemus, who had been initiated into the sacred teaching of Orpheus, was succeeded in theology by Pythagoras, whose disciple was Philolaus, the teacher of our Divine Plato. Hence there is one ancient theology ... taking its origin in Mercurius [i.e. Hermes] and culminating in the divine Plato.<sup>12</sup>

The Plato referred to by Ficino is, obviously, not the Plato of modern scholarship. The Florentine philosopher was heir to the telescoped view of history which saw no decisive difference between Plato and the various neo-Platonists writing several centuries later. Ficino’s reading of writers such as Iamblichus, Proclus and Synesius is seamlessly integrated with his reading of Plato himself, and all can be used to illustrate and further Ficino’s own views.

In 1498, Ficino published one of his most remarkable works, *De vita libri tres*, Three Books on Life. The professed purpose of the book is to explain how scholars can maintain their health and achieve a long life. It is the last of the three books, *De vita coelitus comparanda*, which will occupy us here.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Hankins p. 268

<sup>12</sup> Cited after Yates *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> All subsequent references to and quotes from *De vita coelitus comparanda* are taken from the edition by Carol Kaske and John Clark, *Three Books of Life* (Birmingham, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 1989).

title, together with the long subtitle, point both at the astrological and occult contents of the work, and at the mechanisms of philosophical legitimation used by the author:

The book on How to organize one's life in accordance with the heavens by Marsilio Ficino of Florence, written by him [Ficino] among his commentaries on Plotinus: In what, according to Plotinus, the power of attracting favor from the heavens consist, namely that suitable physical forms can allure the world-soul, the souls of the stars and of daemons<sup>14</sup>

The overarching topic, attracting favors from the heavens by magical means, appears to guide Ficino's use of his sources. Ficino's text is rooted in a pre-modern European discourse on the doctrine of correspondences or signatures, according to which objects sharing certain properties or resembling each other could influence each other, even over vast distances and with no intervening causal mechanism to join them. If two objects A and B are thought to be linked in this way, magic will characteristically involve the manipulation of A in order to make B behave in the desired way.

Ficino's text sets out in detail which specific similarities can be used in order to ritually influence one's world. Furthermore, it gives a technical and intricate rationale for such ritual manipulation, largely based on Neoplatonic and other Hellenistic concepts.<sup>15</sup> Our concern here will, however, not be to trace the origins of the various elements invoked by Ficino, but to summarize the argumentation he adduces in support of his system of magic. What makes

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<sup>14</sup> Marsilii Ficini Florentini Liber de vita coelitus comparanda compositus ab eo inter Commentaria eiusdem in Plotinum. In quo consistat secundum Plotinum virtus favorem coelitus attrahens, scilicet in eo quod anima mundi et stellarum daemonumque animae facile alliciuntur corporum formis accomodatis. (translation mine)

<sup>15</sup> Scholarship devoted to uncovering the intellectual background of Ficino's magic points at the *Picatrix*, an Arabic compilation of Hellenistic magic, as a major source. Others are the Hermetic *Asclepius*, Proclus and other neoplatonic writers. The eclectic list of sources is testimony to Ficino's omnivorous mind and syncretistic inclinations. See Kaske & Clarke *Three Books of Life* pp. 45-48, for a review of the scholarship.

Ficino a philosopher is the extent to which he attempts so rationalize and theorize what is usually a fairly fluid practice.<sup>16</sup>

An abstract and distant *intellectus* rules the cosmos. Our world, however, is concrete and material. How are the two related to each other? Ficino's answer to this Neoplatonic puzzle par excellence is to posit soul, *anima*, as a mediating link. In the intellect are the Platonic ideas. The material world consists of a variety of individual species. Similarly, the mediating soul contains seminal reasons, *rationes seminales*:

intellectus	ideae
anima	rationes seminales
corpus	species

The world is continually regenerated through the reciprocal attraction of these levels. A species that departs from the proper form will be formed from the corresponding idea with its appropriate seminal reason as intermediary. It is this natural attraction which can be used in natural magic. Just as the natural world can attract the needed influences from the higher spheres, so can the practitioner of magic, by knowing the identities of the species that correspond to these various influences. Ficino goes into considerable detail to explain which particular animals, plants and substances correspond to various planetary influences.

How is this influence mediated? Ficino supposes that there is an extremely subtle mediating entity, *spiritus*, neither entirely soul nor material body, which permeates the entire universe. This spirit functions as a connecting medium between the soul of the world and its body. Humans also possess a spirit, and it is this human spirit which, if attuned to the cosmic powers, will draw down and absorb the cosmic *spiritus* and promote the health of the individual.

The aim of much of this esoteric knowledge is therapeutic. By our ways of life and our occupations, we come under the influence of particular planetary forces. Theologians and philosophers (not least Ficino himself!) are influenced

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<sup>16</sup> The present discussion is indebted to the two classical studies of Ficinian magic, Yates *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* and D.P. Walker *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*.

by Saturn, lawyers by Jupiter. Choleric people live under the influence of Mars, those of a more sluggish disposition are Lunar. The particular strengths and weaknesses created by being overly dominated by a particular planetary influence can be suitably corrected by natural magic. Those in need e.g. of solar influences will do well to eat a diet of nourishing things, exercise frequently, rest when necessary and avoid cold and darkness.<sup>17</sup> One should spend time in the open air, since this will enable solar and stellar influences to fill one with cosmic *spiritus* from all sides.<sup>18</sup> The practical advice will seem eminently sensible to a modern reader, it is the magico-religious rationale which places Ficino in an age vastly different from ours.

Other ways to attract the necessary kinds of *spiritus* are less readily translatable into contemporary terms. Thus, herbs, metals and animals associated with the planets can be used in order to draw down the corresponding influences. Relying on the authority of Ptolemy the Egyptians, Hermes Trismegistus and of Zoroaster, Ficino also recommends the use of images, since suitable talismans carry within them an imprint of the *spiritus* of the corresponding entity.<sup>19</sup> An image of a scorpion, fashioned when the moon enters Scorpio, will thus cure a person who has been bitten by a scorpion.

Gems and minerals are particularly useful substances from which to fashion such images, since they have been in the bowels of the earth and have there received the “gifts of the life of the world [---] Things so beautiful cannot be fused under the earth without a consummate effort of the heavens”.<sup>20</sup> So strong are the influences mediated by gems that it is enough to use them as ornaments in order to benefit from them. Hang a pendant made of selenite from your neck when the moon enters Cancer or Taurus, and Lunar influences will soon enter your spirit.<sup>21</sup>

The higher influences are, as it were, transferred down to the various species via the celestial bodies. Since these, in astrological reckoning, are particularly influential at particular times, natural magic also involves knowing

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<sup>17</sup> Kaske & Clark p. 261

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* p. 291

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* ch. 13

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*. p. 309

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*. p. 315

when to draw on the various celestial powers. Much attention is given to the astrological considerations necessary for carrying out the therapeutic-magical interventions at the right times. From the detailed and often very technical advice given by the author, one can infer that a solid knowledge of astrology was deemed indispensable for the successful magician.<sup>22</sup>

These are remarkably unorthodox doctrines to come from the pen of a priest such as Ficino. Aware of the problematic nature of subscribing to such views, Ficino repeatedly addresses the question of what makes them legitimate. The prime mechanism of legitimacy is historical precedent. The view that the created world is a living entity is credited to “the philosophers of India”.<sup>23</sup> Concrete magical recipes are attributed to Iamblichus, the Chaldaean Oracles or to Zoroaster: impeccable authorities in the eyes of many Renaissance readers.<sup>24</sup> As has been remarked by D.P. Walker, Frances Yates and others, the main point of supporting magic with such authorities is to prove that one’s own theories and practices are based on the natural (and therefore god-given) properties of the cosmos, and not on the existence and action of demonic beings.<sup>25</sup> The strategy worked: accused of heresy by the Curia, Ficino successfully argued that he had merely presented the views of the ancients. In stead of being banned, *De vita* became one of the most widely circulated books of its time, nearly thirty editions appearing until the work passed out of fashion in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup>

### *Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) and De incantationibus*

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<sup>22</sup> Highly technical discussions are found e.g. in chapters 2, 6 and 8 to 10 of *De vita coelitus comparanda*.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p. 255

<sup>24</sup> The claim that magic was originally a Persian creation, a respectable art attributable to Zoroaster, goes back to antiquity. See e.g. Plato *Alcibiades* 122b and ff. and Pliny *Natural History* book 30. An influential competing theory regarded magic as having supernatural origins, consisting in a communion with demons. Educated Renaissance readers will thus in Ficino’s attribution to Zoroaster and the Chaldeans have found an echo of “well-known facts” as well as a defusing of any possible association between Ficinian natural magic and demonic forces.

<sup>25</sup> See Yates and Walker *op. cit.* for a full discussion.

<sup>26</sup> Kaske & Clark p. 3

The decades around the turn of thirteenth century saw a wave of translations of the writings of Aristotle.<sup>27</sup> Teachers of natural philosophy were required to teach and comment on selected parts of the Aristotelian corpus. Over the years, a truly vast commentarial literature had been translated as well as composed. By the time Pietro Pomponazzi made his career in teaching philosophy at the universities of Padua, Ferrara and Bologna, beginning in 1484, it had become a requirement that professors should master this literature. Pomponazzi's own texts discuss several of the problems involved in attempting to reconcile Aristotelianism and revealed religion. In particular, he focused on the then hot topics of the immortality of the soul, the nature of miracles and on the free will of man. All three involved major exegetical problems. Aristotle and his main commentators, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroës, could be interpreted as if they argued that the soul was mortal. Aristotle's cosmology seemed to operate on completely regular principles, leaving no place for either divine intervention or free will. How could such statements be harmonized with the clear opinions to the contrary propounded by the Church?

Pomponazzi's treatises, which argued philosophically for the mortality of the soul, understandably caused considerable controversy. A papal warning required him to retract his position. Perhaps as a consequence of these events, Pomponazzi prudently chose not to publish his treatises on miracles and fate. *De naturalium effectuum causis sive de incantationibus* (in the following referred to as *De incantationibus*), his philosophical investigation of the possibility of divine intervention in human affairs, was written in 1520 but was only published posthumously in 1556. Similarly, *De fato* which was completed in the same year was only published in 1567.

In *De incantationibus*, Pomponazzi discusses whether an Aristotelian view of nature is compatible with the belief in miraculous interventions, charms, oracles, demonic possession, and magical operations.<sup>28</sup> The Aristotelian

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<sup>27</sup> The following contextualization of Pomponazzi's oeuvre summarizes the discussion in Martin L. Pine *Pietro Pomponazzi: Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance* (Padua: Antenore 1986), pp. 39 ff.

<sup>28</sup> All subsequent references to *De incantationibus* are to Petrus Pomponatius *De naturalium effectuum causis sive de incantationibus* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1970; facsimile of the original

cosmos postulates the existence of a Prime Mover, acting on the created sublunary world only through the intermediary of the various intelligences that move the heavenly spheres. These intelligences are eternal and operate in a perfectly regular fashion, making miraculous interruptions of the natural course of events impossible. Since a rejection of miracles directly contradicted Scripture, such a strictly deterministic natural philosophy was overruled by revelation, and in this matter fideism was required. Philosophically speaking, however, a priori considerations could show that miracles are indeed impossible.

Pomponazzi realizes that there are innumerable testimonies to the contrary: miraculous events abound in texts from Antiquity as well as in contemporary sources. His treatise attempts to show that such events can be explained by natural means rather than e.g. as the intervention of demons. A number of seeming miracles are adduced, and are given possible natural explanations.

Many natural events are caused by invisible forces and are therefore incomprehensible to the layperson. In chapter 3 of *De incantationibus*, Pomponazzi reports a variety of wondrous events that by all accounts have natural causes. Magnets have the mysterious ability to attract iron. Albertus Magnus and other weighty authorities report that certain stones and plants can provoke rain and hail while others make the rains stop. The mysterious fish called the Echeneis, which is a mere half foot long, is able to stop a two hundred foot ship in its course. The ignorant masses who do not know the natural causes of such events might attribute them to God, angels or demons. Wiser men understand that such seeming interruptions of the natural order are due to three kinds of causes. Some herbs, stones and minerals affect other bodies directly. Others produce their effects via the vapors that they exude, for instance when heated. Yet others work due to the fact that minerals and

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edition printed as part of Petrus Pomponatius *Opera*, Basel 1567). The only translation of this work into any modern language is an abridged French version, Henri Busson *Des causes des merveilles de la nature ou les enchantements* (Paris: Rieder 1930), which has not been available to me. *De incantationibus* is discussed in some detail in Thorndike *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 5, pp. 98-110 and Martin L.Pine *Pietro Pomponazzi: Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance* (Padova: Antenore, 1986), pp. 235-274.

animals can possess occult – i.e. hidden – but perfectly natural virtues. Indeed, at this point Pomponazzi directly quotes Marsilio Ficino, whose *Theologia Platonica* gives numerous examples of such occult properties.<sup>29</sup>

These properties are unevenly distributed in nature: specific cures are for instance caused only by specific plants. By analogy, humans also possess different virtues in varying degrees, a fact that is confirmed by the everyday observation that some men are primarily affected by Jupiter, others by Saturn and yet others by Mercury, which impart them with different characteristics.<sup>30</sup> The same kinds of properties that differentiate the minerals, plants and animals also exist in humans, who can be seen as microcosms.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the same three mechanisms that operative in natural substances – direct action, exhaled vapors and occult properties – by analogy inhere also in humans.<sup>32</sup> That is e.g. how it may be possible for people to influence weather: if certain herbs and stones have natural properties that can either start or stop the rain, the same goes for humans.<sup>33</sup> Some of these properties seem to us as strange as the most wondrous properties of nature. Avicenna relates that there is a race of people in the country Denascia who are immune to snakebites, so that if a snake bites them it is the snake that will die.<sup>34</sup>

The analogy between man as microcosm and surrounding macrocosm thus explains the sometimes extraordinary effects natural substances can have on the human body, as well as the effects people can have on the world around them. Other strange influences can be explained, Pomponazzi affirms, by means of one of the ubiquitous pre-modern beliefs in Western intellectual history, that of the *imaginatio* or *vis imaginativa*. Drawing on an Aristotelian anthropology, Pomponazzi and his contemporaries postulated that imagination functioned as an intermediary between the senses and the intellect, being the faculty that transforms sense impressions into images. The concept of imagination was invoked in a variety of ways throughout the

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<sup>29</sup> *De incantationibus*, p. 23. The reference is to Ficino *Theologia Platonica*, book 4, ch. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 26

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 27

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 58

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 237

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 46

Middle Ages and Renaissance in order to explain the interaction between the body and the mental faculties. Why does the sight of food make us salivate? Why does the memory of an embarrassing *faux pas* make us blush? It is the *vis imaginativa* that operates.<sup>35</sup>

Pomponazzi invokes imagination in order to explain wondrous events that he and his contemporaries were convinced took place. When a pregnant woman has striking sense impressions at the moment of conceiving a child, the *vis imaginativa* transmits those impressions to the developing foetus. Conversely, a man with seeming magical abilities is a master at manipulating the imagination of others.

In all of this, Pomponazzi is a typical representative of his time. Like his contemporaries, he takes his empirical matter from the Ancients, and his theories from the pool of explanatory resources to be found in his culture. Where Pomponazzi is more radical than most of his peers, is that he openly discusses the consequences of this view of how the cosmos operates for normative Christian doctrines, as these were defined by various clerical powers. In a way that must seem foreign to most modern readers, it was generally understood that miracles buttressed the veracity of the Christian faith. Without miracles, it would make little sense to believe in revelation. This understanding of miracles as a core element in Christianity is an enduring structural characteristic from late antiquity, via the Middle Ages and at least up to the Enlightenment.<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas affirms the doctrinal centrality of miracles, explaining that “*in order to affirm those truths that lie beyond natural reason, [God] produces visible wonders that exceed the powers of all nature, namely by miraculously curing the ill, returning the dead to life and miraculously stopping the heavenly bodies in their course*”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid* p. 48-49

<sup>36</sup> For the role of miracles in late Antiquity, see Peter Brown *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago University Press); for the Middle Ages, see Benedicta Ward *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (London: Scolar Press, 1982); for the period leading up to the Enlightenment, see R.M. Burns *The Great Debate on Miracles* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press 1981) and J.C.A. Gaskin *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1978), especially pp. 136-152.

<sup>37</sup> [A]d confirmandum ea quae naturalem cognitionem excedunt, opera visibiliter ostendit quae totius naturae superant facultatem; videlicet in mirabili curatione languorum,

If wondrous events in the present age as well as in classical literature can be explained as the natural effects of the motions of the heavens, of vapors and occult properties, and of the effect of the *vis imaginativa*, where does that leave the Biblical miracles? Indeed, where does it leave the Christian faith? In chapter 5, a section which constitutes a systematic attempt to by Pomponazzi to defend his explanations against counterarguments, the seventh *dubitatio* touches on this delicate issue. If Pomponazzi's explanations are accepted, would they not constitute an attack on the laws of Moses and Christ?<sup>38</sup> Indeed, nothing miraculous is to be found in the accounts in Exodus of Moses' powers. If Pharaoh's sorcerers could produce similar effects as the prophet of the Hebrews, and did so without divine intervention, this must be a strong argument for assuming that the same natural causes were operative in the case of Moses.

Even the miracles of the New Testament can be explained in non-supernatural terms.<sup>39</sup> Nor are the exceptional experiences of contemporary Christians to be explained by invoking the miraculous. When pious people receive stigmata, for instance, these are induced by the same kind of *vis imaginativa* that affects the foetus.

Whether through faith or caution, Pomponazzi later makes a complete reversal of his previous position. He returns to the question of true miracles and affirms that, in spite of his previous discussion, there are indeed true divine interventions. When the Pharaoh's sorcerers attempted to produce snakes, this was done through natural means. When Moses did the same, this was a divine intervention. The results may have looked alike, but in such cases one must place one's faith in the Church, which pronounces these two to be utterly distinct.<sup>40</sup> When required to believe, one must believe.

However, this pious affirmation becomes radically relativized when Pomponazzi towards the very end of his book discusses whether revealed religion itself may be subject to celestial and therefore natural causes. The

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mortuorum suscitatione, caelestium corporum mirabili immutatione. *Summa contra gentiles* I.6.2. Emphasis mine.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid* p. 65

<sup>39</sup> *ibid* p. 66

<sup>40</sup> *ibid* p. 82

heavenly cycles determine the generation and corruption of *all* phenomena in the sublunar world – thus also of the various “laws” or religions. For a time, nothing was seen as more honorable than following the law of Jupiter, and the cross was vilified. Then, Roman religion declined and the Christian law took its place.<sup>41</sup> With the change of religions there arose wonders, produced by the heavenly bodies in support of the new law. As a religion grows older, the impetus that drives miraculous events will also weaken, until it ultimately dies out. As the miracles cease to occur, the religion also reaches the end of its life cycle and is replaced by yet another. Astrology thus explains and encompasses the entire history of religions.

*Rational philosophers of magic?*

Ficino and Pomponazzi, each in his own way, created a *bricolage* that explains why the seemingly mysterious or uncanny is in reality an expression of the natural regularities of the cosmos. By systematizing what a later, positivistic age would come to label a magical world view, Ficino and Pomponazzi come across as rational philosophers of magic.

Combining the words *rational*, *philosophy* and *magic* risks making a sentence read as an oxymoron. The reason for this immediate reaction is intimately bound up with the three kinds of scholarly habitus outlined at the beginning of this article. Magic connotes an opposite of both religion and rationality, a survival from more primitive days that will have been jettisoned by thinkers of a more mature age.

The term *magic* has as many definitions as there are scholars of the phenomenon. A recent survey of the uses of the term and the theories associated with various understandings of magic lists a large number of at times incommensurable opinions.<sup>42</sup> However, a classic study by Stanley Tambiah notes that many of these definitions are ultimately rooted in crypto-theological norms.<sup>43</sup> The religious elite tries to define its own beliefs as “true

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid* p. 285-6

<sup>42</sup> Graham Cunningham, *Religion and Magic: Approaches and Theories* (New York: New York University Press 1999)

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Tambiah *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), esp. p. 82.

religion”, and to dismiss the beliefs of others as something radically different and therefore lesser. Whereas older terms for “false religion” – idolatry, paganism, fetishism – have gone out of fashion, *magic* has over the centuries remained a controversial epithet usually affixed to the practices of despised others. These normative judgments influenced pioneers in the study of anthropology, such as Edward Tylor and James Frazer, to suggest that magic is a more primitive precursor of both religion and science. Magic is supposedly a pre-religious enterprise, in that it attempts to coerce the spiritual world. It is pre-scientific in that it operates according to an erroneous of nature. Briefly, magic is the application of causal laws that do not work.<sup>44</sup>

Whatever we who have the advantage of five centuries of hindsight may make of the validity of Ficino’s and Pomponazzi’s arguments – and it is helpful to remind oneself that the vast majority of philosophical arguments are torn to shreds by critics of a later age – their authors hardly come across as “primitive”. There are, however, ways of approaching the topic of magic that do not invoke such evolutionist concepts. Tambiah labels such approaches *participatory*, drawing on the work of the French philosopher and sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939).

Lévy-Bruhl postulated that there are two fundamental modes of orienting oneself in the world. The first is mechanical-causal, the other participatory. It is not the case that magic misapplies mechanical-causal laws, as Frazer would have argued. Rather, magical thought operates on radically different assumptions. Participatory thinking is predicated on finding hidden links, on meaning, on the conviction that transcendent entities intervene in human life. Lévy-Bruhl at first argued that only “primitive” peoples were mired in participatory thinking, but later came to accept that both forms of reasoning coexist in all social formations. The fact that both modes can be found in contemporary society can readily be illustrated by an example. If a ship sinks in the middle of the ocean, and the question “why did it happen” is answered from a mechanical-causal perspective, factors such as extreme weather

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<sup>44</sup> One of the most basic problems with the “magic is failed science” argument is of course that all scientific hypotheses that do not stand the test of time would be defined as “magic”. Whatever one might have to say of e.g. 20th century steady-state cosmology, it would seem bizarre to call Fred Hoyle a magician.

conditions and structural faults in the construction of the vessel can be invoked. However, those who have lost a family member on board the ship will hardly be satisfied with such an explanation. They are effectively asking a participatory question: “what meaning can I give this disaster, how can I go on living after it has occurred”.

Ficino and Pomponazzi lived in a world filled with wondrous events. As argued by James McClenon, much religious creativity takes such events as its point of departure.<sup>45</sup> Both *De vita* and *De incantationibus* were written by authors who accessed a pool of cultural resources of, inter alia, Scriptural, patristic, Platonic, Aristotelian and folk religious origins. They used these resources because they were impelled to explain the workings of a cosmos in which they “knew” that such wondrous events could take place. What makes them philosophers is their refusal to merely accept wondrous events as inexplicable acts of a higher, perhaps divine will. The seemingly strange and miraculous needed to be subsumed under a broader vision of how the world operates.

When it came to selecting cultural resources, the two Renaissance authors made vastly different choices. Ficino’s primary inclination is toward a Platonic conception, which made him base his magic on an understanding of the cosmos as a harmonic, living whole, ultimately created by God. Magic works because God has seen fit to construct a cosmos in a magical way. God created correspondences between elements in the created world and in the spiritual dimension. The details of this system are borrowed and reinterpreted from the most diverse sources. The use to which these details are put, strikes one as a prime example of a participatory mode of thinking.

No matter how different Pomponazzi’s world is from ours, *De incantationibus* is a text that strikes one as neither primitive nor participatory. The author sympathizes with a radically Aristotelian view, in which the divine is a distant first cause, mediating its influence via secondary causes which operate in a completely regular fashion. Although his divine First Mover may come close to being a distant *deus otiosus*, his religious skepticism has in no way

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<sup>45</sup> James McClenon *Wondrous Events: Foundations of Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1994)

“secularized” him. For that, one needs to wait at least another century. Spinoza’s critique of miracles in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) belongs to our intellectual world, no longer to Pomponazzi’s. The author of *De incantationibus* may have moved several steps toward a Weberian disenchantment, but this has not driven him away from a belief in magic and wonders.

Ficino and Pomponazzi lived in a past that, in the words of David Lowenthal, was indeed a different country.<sup>46</sup> Both writers believed in wonders and magic, because the culture in which they lived provided them with ample opportunities and reasons to do so. Both writers integrated their understanding of the seemingly miraculous into a philosophical whole. Analyzing what they wrote, merely in order to unearth what they may mean to us and our own intellectual preoccupations, strips them of their radical, historical otherness.

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<sup>46</sup> David Lowenthal *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985)

Rationalists generally develop their view in two ways. First, they argue that there are cases where the content of our concepts or knowledge outstrips the information that sense experience can provide. Then the debate, Rationalism vs. Empiricism, is joined. The fact that philosophers can be both rationalists and empiricists has implications for the classification schemes often employed in the history of philosophy, especially the one traditionally used to describe the Early Modern Period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leading up to Kant. It is standard practice to group the major philosophers of this period as either rationalists or empiricists and to suggest that those under one heading share a common agenda in opposition to those under the other.

5. Several important philosophical developments occurred during the Renaissance including the emergence of the Reformation, Science and Political Philosophy. But before these are discussed at length, we shall examine several important philosophers of the early Renaissance whose thoughts were instrumental in the development of these philosophical trends.

(2) In regard to the promise of a son through his wife Sarah, Luther commented, "There is no doubt that faith and reason mightly fell out in Abraham's heart about this matter, yet at last did faith get the better, and overcame and strangled reason, that all cruellest and most fatal enemy of God." c. Luther also rejected "works" (Christian ethics) as.