



On What is Called 'Supernatural'

Much of what people find problematic about religion today has to do with a messy vocabulary that has been inherited, taken for granted, and that has gone unmodified to appeal to modern sensibilities. This is why the idea of "that old time religion" no longer works for many millions of people. We have many instances of language that was once used and salient but that is no longer useful and no longer able to resonate. Still, at times old words and phrases can be made the subject of our creative reconstitution and revival.

Take the word 'supernatural' as one example. It is a word that has become a pejorative in our modern culture, especially in the modern West. This does not mean that the word should be jettisoned, but at the very least it needs to be rethought. It needs to be rethought so as to bridge the communicative gap between people with religious sensibilities and those who claim no such sensibilities, and it needs to be rethought for the sake of modern religious people themselves.

'Supernatural' evokes notions of everything from fairies and pixies to the various sophisticated and historical notions of God found in the Qur'an, Bible and Vedas. It gets associated with mere fancies, hallucinations, childish superstition, and occurrences that cannot be supported by human observation or test, and critics of religion seize upon this as a way to indict all religion and all religious experience, even the rich traditional mytho-poetic systems referenced.

There is a modern way of understanding 'supernatural' and it has little to do with pixies. The supernatural is actually an important way to describe *a kind of experience*, rather than a kind of thing in the world. Let us suppose that what we mean by 'supernatural' has little to do with claims about the world or what is real in it from a scientific point of view, but much to do with *ways of seeing* the world, of engaging the world. Supernatural seeing and engagement remain unavailable to persons who preclude them for their own use, or who shut down in themselves the kind of synthetic imagination that makes life rich and deep. Supernatural seeing is *active sight* that imbues the world with meaning, connections, purposes, possibilities. In so imbuing it, this active sight takes the world others passively receive with the mere organs of sight and creates whole new worlds with living and new possibilities. It requires refined human imagination, not imaginings. It requires, at a minimum, the spirit of the bard. Both

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the poet and the religious have supernatural eyes, not merely passive sight, instrumental sight. They can see God in nature, daily, with no doubts.

Modern people too often only see the world as something to be used, or in some nominalist way in which only things exist, not concepts, not dreams, not hopes, not love. But there is a way of seeing the world in supernatural terms without the baggage of superstition and mere imaginings. The true supernaturalist of the modern age insists that what is real is not limited to things only, or forces of nature measurable by scientific instruments, but also human relationships, love, hope, faith, devotion, loyalty, trust - all things which have no simple physical explanation. To use the words of philosophers, the supernaturalist of this type does not restrict his ontology to that of the scientist, and yet he remains just as rational, perhaps more rational, than those who see only with scientific or scientific eyes.

While there are bodily states that comport with such ideas as hope and love (brain states and firing neurotransmitters, locations on genes that make them possible, etc.), no such reduction of them to mere chemistry can possibly do justice to such realities as love and hope, and lived human experience says *No!* to any and all such attempts to so reduce them. The love of a child is not merely a place on a gene. To think so is a ghastly malformation of thought and a defect in the human heart that can only cut us off from our true selves knowable only through lived experience.

The reductionist, be she duped by scientism or merely a materialist of some variety, is forced to reduce further and further to explain her position. What she ultimately arrives at is some claim about our "essential natures" - that we are star stuff (the idea that we can be reduced to gas and heavy metal actually titillates her), or nature's thrust to pass on collections of genes. But the true supernaturalist balks at such reductionism, as do many who do not describe themselves as religious or even particularly spiritual, but who remain true to their own experience of the world.

We need to heal the wounds of modernity as we throw off backward literalism, fundamentalism and superstition. We must reclaim and transform our language. Religion is not impossible in the modern world, but religion and its vocabularies must continue to be renewed and given new meaning.



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