

## Some Disenchantment with “Enchantment”

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper offers a philosophical analysis of the relationship between values and applied sciences (e.g., forest resource management) through a critical examination of the concept of *enchantment*. We argue that rejecting an enchanted view of the natural world does not entail a value-free approach to science. Thus, we propose four models of stewardship as a framework for considering the relationship between values and forest resource management.

**KEYWORDS:** enchantment, values, science, stewardship, environmentalism

## **Introduction**

At the 1999 national convention of the Society of American Foresters, Alan G. McQuillan, Emeritus Professor of Forest Management at the University of Montana, presented a paper entitled “Why We Should Not Seek to Reenchant Science.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper, McQuillan argues that the recent effort by process philosophers to re-infuse science with religious values or, as the title of his paper suggests, to “reenchant science,” threatens to undermine the integrity of science “as independent from matters of belief and faith.”<sup>2</sup> As the foregoing understanding of science suggests, McQuillan argues against the rechantment of science on the basis of a familiar dichotomy inherited from the eighteenth-century British empiricist, David Hume: a dichotomy between facts and values.<sup>3</sup> According to McQuillan, the move by process philosophers such as David Griffin and John Cobb<sup>4</sup> to “infuse science with religion” amounts to an eradication of this Humean dichotomy. For McQuillan, the sharp separation of facts (objects and events in the world susceptible to inter-subjective observation and experimentation) and values (which, from McQuillan’s perspective, appear to amount to no more than personal faith or beliefs based on “passion, emotion, or feeling”) is essential, both to the preservation of legitimate modern scientific inquiry and to the perpetuation of religious freedom. Thus, despite his expressed sympathies with Cobb’s worries about the so-called “disenchantment of nature,” McQuillan concludes that science should remain an un-enchanted enterprise.

In this paper we consider the concept of enchantment with a view toward offering a critical response to McQuillan. In particular, we argue that although McQuillan’s philosophical instincts are sound insofar as he expresses disagreement with the picture of re-enchanted science offered by process thinkers like Griffin and Cobb, his Humean alternative leaves much to be desired as a comprehensive account of the relationship between scientific inquiry (fact) and religion or enchantment (value). This failing on McQuillan’s part is not without practical import. For while the concept of enchantment, as classically and even more recently understood, is relatively unhelpful in the advancement of science, this does not entail, as McQuillan’s paper suggests, that science does or even should proceed in a value-free vacuum. On the contrary, science generally and forest management in particular depends upon principles and assumptions that are inherently value-laden. Whether such value constitutes “enchantment” as such is ultimately more or less irrelevant for our purposes. To the extent that one employs the concept of enchantment as a synonym for value (as McQuillan appears to do) science cannot and must not be disenchanted. Thus, the most important question for scientists, especially those practitioners in the area of forest management, is this. With what set of values will your science be enchanted?

In building a case for these conclusions, we will proceed as follows. Initially, we will offer an introduction of the concept of enchantment both as “classically” conceived and as understood by process thinkers like Griffin and Cobb. Having elucidated this concept, we will offer a brief assessment of the concept of enchantment, expressing, along with McQuillan, our own disenchantment with it. However, unlike McQuillan, we do not conclude that the use of a broad concept of value in science is altogether out of place. Thus, we will close by sketching an outline of the kind of value we believe to be most appropriate, especially in the area of forest resource management.

## **The Concept of Enchantment**

According to Morris Berman, “The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment.”<sup>5</sup> Berman’s sweeping claim is no doubt an oversimplification. But his synopsis of an enchanted worldview is an instructive starting point for understanding the classical concept of enchantment. Etymologically, the term “enchantment” generally confirms Berman’s view. A brief study of the word and its English cognates reveals that enchanted things are things endowed with magical powers or properties. Thus, to view nature as enchanted is to view the elements of which it is comprised – rocks, trees, and rivers – as being endowed with powers and properties of a magical sort, or as Berman puts it more gently, as being “wondrous” and “alive.”

In his edited anthology, *The Reenchantment of Science*, David Griffin confirms this classical conception of enchantment indirectly with his discussion of the “disenchantment of the world” – a phrase Griffin traces back to the work of Max Weber. According to Griffin, “Weber’s term for disenchantment was *Entzauberung*, which literally means ‘taking the magic out.’”<sup>6</sup> Thus, an enchanted view of nature is one in which natural objects are invested with occult powers and properties. In short, it is an animistic view of the world. As classically understood, an enchanted nature is not one from which the divine is separated. Rather, nature is as it were saturated with divine life.

As is evident, the classic concept of enchantment carries with it an inherent tendency toward pantheism. The pantheistic tendency is the tendency to view natural objects as possessing personal interests and powers of self-direction traditionally associated with the spiritual or the divine. This sort of animism in nature is often vividly portrayed in the literature of authors whose sympathies lie with Romanticism. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien’s famous trilogy, *The Lord of Rings*, includes a set of creatures known as Ents. Ents are creatures whose outward appearance would invariably lead a casual observer to mistake them for old trees in an ordinary forest. Yet, despite their noticeably tree-like appearance, Ents are “tree-herds” – the shepherds of the trees. In Tolkien’s imagined Middle Earth, the Ents are not only endowed with powers of locomotion, but with minds, free will, language, and an entire intellectual history captured in song and verse. From a modern scientific perspective, such “spiritual” or higher-order powers are simply not possessed by any biological organisms of which we are aware other than human beings. Yet, in its classical conception, an enchanted world is one in which every biological organism is possessed of such powers to one degree or another. And it is this possession of god-like powers by every aspect of nature that constitutes the essence of a pantheistic worldview.

The inherent pantheistic tendencies of the classical conception of enchantment explain the resurrection of an enchanted worldview in the work of process philosopher-theologians such as Griffin and Cobb. This is because the process theism to which Griffin and Cobb are committed is fundamentally panentheistic. The difference between pantheism and panentheism is subtle but significant; it accounts for the difference between the classical conception of enchantment and its more contemporary resurrection the work of Griffin and Cobb. Standard pantheism simply maintains divine immanence in nature through and through. The divine is everything and everything is divine. Thus, pantheism assumes a kind of crude identity between the natural and the spiritual. By contrast, panentheism attempts to preserve a level of transcendence for the divine while simultaneously maintaining a high degree of immanence. According to this view, the divine is intimately related to the natural order by way of a kind of mutual inter-dynamism while simultaneously remaining in some respects transcendent. Thus,

pantheism avoids the crude identity between the natural and the spiritual, but maintains a close connection between the two nonetheless. As a result, the contemporary concept of enchantment proposed by Griffin and Cobb is more subtle. The subtle shift is accomplished on the basis of an ecological holism. For Griffin and Cobb, every organism in nature is interrelated in such a way that it is inappropriate to distinguish one organism and its activities from that of another. Nature is one dynamic interrelated event or process. Moreover, Cobb notes an implication of this view. “Human beings are, without remainder, part of the ecosystem. Everything is both subject and object, and human beings are no exception.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, to the extent that human beings possess the higher-order powers of self-direction and personal interests typically associated with the divine, so also does the whole of nature by virtue of its interconnectedness to human beings. According to this view, enchantment is not a property of a particular object; rather, it is a property of the system as a whole of which objects are ultimately indistinguishable parts.

### **Enchantment and the Grounding Problem**

As we noted at the outset, the enchanted view of science advocated by Griffin and Cobb drew sharp criticism from Alan McQuillan at the 1999 national convention of the Society of American Foresters. However, McQuillan’s criticism of Griffin and Cobb is not ultimately rooted in a rejection of the concept of enchantment *as such*. Rather, McQuillan’s rejection of enchantment is the conclusion of a more general line of reasoning that might be summarized as follows. Science is and should remain an essentially value-free (objective, factual) enterprise. Enchantment is an inherently value-laden concept. Therefore, we should not seek to re-enchant science. McQuillan writes:

*Despite lingering and irreducible uncertainty, there remains, I argue, a categorical distinction between those things that we would call facts, and things that are utterly inseparable from considerations of value and faith . . . With regard to science . . . it seems clear that we should defend Hume’s separation of fact and value. For this reason alone, we should resist attempts to reenchant science.*<sup>8</sup>

McQuillan’s rejection of enchantment is based on a categorical rejection of all value in science. And while we concur with McQuillan’s rejection of the concept of enchantment *as such* in both its classical and contemporary forms, we disagree with the idea that science is or even can be an essentially value-free enterprise. To the contrary, because it involves human (moral) agents making choices and acting upon those choices, science is an essentially value-laden enterprise. This is particularly the case in applied sciences such as forest management. Thus, our rejection of the concept of enchantment *as such* is not based on the reasoning McQuillan offers. By contrast, we reject the concept of enchantment *as such* not because of its obvious association with values generally, but rather, because of its connection to one type of value in particular – ultimately, in our estimation, the wrong type.

Our reasons for rejecting the concept of enchantment *as such* come into sharper focus when one considers the role that the concept of enchantment plays in relation to what we will call “the grounding problem.” The grounding problem is a general philosophical problem that arises in relation to any normative claim. Normative claims are those claims that state what *should* or *ought to be* the case (as opposed to descriptive claims that simply state what *is* the case). The grounding problem is the problem of providing adequate philosophical grounds (i.e., justification) for a normative claim. Consider, for example, the normative claim: “Old-growth

forests should remain undisturbed.” In relation to a claim such as this, the grounding problem is the problem of providing grounds for such a claim. On what basis is one justified in holding the position that old-growth forests ought not to be disturbed? In effect, an adequate solution to the grounding problem is simply an adequate answer to the inevitable question “why?”

Of course the grounding problem itself is larger than any one particular normative claim. For, normative claims about the environment or forest management do not typically stand in isolation. Rather, they collectively form a web of beliefs about how one ought to interact with the environment or how one ought to manage forests generally. Thus, in a larger sense, the grounding problem is the problem of articulating *what*, if anything, determines how one should interact *on the whole* with the environment or how one *generally* ought to manage forests.

With the grounding problem in view, one is better situated to apprehend how the concept of enchantment functions as a proposed solution or response to it. The proponent of enchantment asserts that the reason one ought to interact with the environment in the manner specified by his “land ethic” is because nature is enchanted. In other words, it is how nature is viewed (i.e., as enchanted) that supposedly grounds one’s moral obligation to interact with it in a particular way. One is obliged to interact with nature in that way because of the kind of thing that nature itself is supposed to be. On the classical view of enchantment, nature is divine. Thus, to violate nature is, in effect, to violate god. Alternatively, on the more contemporary view of enchantment proposed by process philosophers such as Griffin and Cobb, nature is one interconnected, dynamic event. Thus, to violate nature is, in effect, to violate a synthetic Whole of which one is an indistinguishable part. In effect, both conceptions of enchantment ground the obligations that one has to interact with nature in a particular way in the inherent value of the natural objects themselves. The former (classical) conception does so by making nature divine. The latter (contemporary) conception does so by obliterating the distinction between human subjects (possessing inherent value) and natural objects. In this way, the concept of enchantment functions as a justification for why nature ought to be treated in a particular way.

Our own reason for rejecting the concept of enchantment in both its classical and contemporary manifestations is simple. There is neither adequate warrant for the view that natural objects are gods, nor for the view that the distinction between human subjects and natural objects is ultimately illusory. Thus, we concur with McQuillan’s position that scientists should resist the attempt to reenchanted nature insofar as we are dealing with the concept of enchantment in either its classical or contemporary forms. However, it does not follow from a rejection of the concept of enchantment *as such* that science should proceed as an essentially value-free enterprise (as McQuillan seems to think that it does). As we have already noted, the fact that science (esp. applied sciences) involves human agents making choices and acting on those choices entails that science is necessarily a value-laden enterprise. So the fundamental question of value for the practicing scientist is not whether one should infuse science with value but *with which or whose value(s) will science be infused?* Specifically, if the concept of enchantment *as such* is no longer a viable candidate, then what other values are available by which science might be “enchanted” without viewing nature as enchanted?

### **Stewardship: Four Models**

As we have argued, the principal deficiency of the concept of enchantment in both its classical and contemporary forms is its effort to ground one’s obligations to interact with nature in particular ways in the inherent value of the natural objects themselves. There is simply not

enough reason to think that natural objects have whatever worth they do by virtue of being divine or by virtue of being intimately connected to human beings. So if natural objects do not have value neither by virtue of their divinity nor by virtue of their oneness with humanity, then what grounds one's moral obligations to interact with nature in particular ways? Our suggestion is that whatever obligations one might have to interact with nature in particular ways is most appropriately grounded in the *relationship* one has to those to whom natural objects in question belong. In short, the proper set of values with which science (esp. forest management) ought to be infused is one that will ultimately be rooted in a concept of stewardship.

The concept of stewardship differs from the concept of enchantment in the following way. Whereas the latter attempts to ground one's moral obligations to interact with nature in particular ways in the inherent value of the natural objects themselves, the former grounds those obligations in the interests of the one(s) to whom the natural objects belong. A steward is a safeguard. A steward does not protect the objects entrusted to his care because of the intrinsic worth of the objects themselves. Rather a steward protects the objects entrusted to his care because of the interests of the one(s) who entrusts it. For example, in the specific case of forest management, whatever obligations a forester may have to manage forests in the particular ways that he does would be grounded in an obligation to protect the interests of the one(s) who entrusted the management of those resources to the forester's care.

Of course, the foregoing illustration immediately raises an important philosophical concern. Specifically, with whose interests should the forester ultimately be concerned when it comes to being a steward of those resources that have been entrusted to his care? Some might suggest that the immediate concern is with the interests of the organization with which the forester is affiliated or the client for which the forester works. Thus, to the extent that the organization to which the forester belongs or the client for which he works is interested in efficiency, productivity, or sustainability, the forester has an obligation to protect these interests as a steward of the resources with which he has been entrusted. However, the emphasis on the immediate interests of the organization, corporation, or client that the forester is obliged to represent merely avoids the larger philosophical issue. For the organization, corporation, or client ultimately has the interests that it does (e.g., efficiency, productivity, or sustainability) because it has another larger set of interests in view. Our suggestion here is that the larger set of interests we have in mind typically fall broadly within one of four models. The four models are distinguished by those whose interests are ultimately at stake. And in the area of forest resource management, there are broadly four possibilities for whose interests are ultimately at stake. These are as follows:

1. Oneself – egoistic consumerism,
2. Current majority – democratic utilitarianism
3. Future generations – humanistic altruism (a type of environmentalism)
4. God – classical monotheism

Note that all four models represent forms of stewardship – i.e., of protecting the interests of the one(s) to whom the resources belong. Some corporations, for example, may adopt of perspective of egoistic consumerism (model 1) according to which the only interests with which the corporation's stewards need concern themselves are the interests of the corporation itself. Others might argue that corporations have an obligation to take into consideration the impact that their actions may have on the interests of the current majority (model 2). Still others may

suggest that we have obligations to protect vital forest resources in particular ways by virtue of our obligation to future generations (model 3). In any case, all four models ground the obligation to interact with nature in particular ways in the relationship of stewardship. Moreover, it is noteworthy that by virtue of falling under the conceptual category of stewardship, all four models are essentially value-laden. Thus, contrary to what McQuillan believes, science (esp. applied sciences like forest management) cannot proceed on a purely factual basis to the exclusion of all value whatsoever.

It is beyond the scope of this particular paper to argue for the tenability of one of these four models of stewardship over the others. Nevertheless, our own view is that model 4, classical monotheism, represents the most promising option for a philosophically defensible model of stewardship, especially in the area of forest management. This is partly because we believe that models 1-3 have deficiencies that ultimately render them philosophically implausible. In brief, since model 2 (democratic utilitarianism) is merely an aggregate version of model 1 (egoistic consumerism), it suffers from the same defects. In particular, both models have historically demonstrated and would likely continue to demonstrate an inability to produce a sustainable use of limited natural resources. Human beings simply require more powerful checks and balances than their own greedy, selfish, consumptive (even if collective) wills. Thus, models 3 and 4 are the main contenders. Although model 3 (humanistic altruism) provides a stronger motive against negative tendencies inherent in models 1 and 2, we believe that it is not as decisive against these tendencies as model 4. Of course, substantiating all of these claims requires more discussion than is offered here – perhaps a task for a future paper.

## **Conclusion**

To the extent that our analysis is on track, McQuillan's disenchantment with enchantment requires an important corrective. The concept of enchantment in both its classical and contemporary forms may not be the appropriate value with which science should be infused. But this is not because science is essentially value neutral. All science, and applied science in particular, necessarily proceeds on the basis of some value(s). The issue is not whether but on which values science will function. We have suggested that the most appropriate way to ground the values associated with forest resource management is to employ some model of stewardship. On one level, this violates the Humean dichotomy between fact and value that McQuillan seems so concerned to preserve. For by wrestling with questions of stewardship, on any of the four models that we have proposed, one must wrestle with how values will be brought to bear on the science of forest resource management. Yet on another level, this is precisely what we should expect if, as we have argued in this paper, the Humean dichotomy does not apply in the case of science. In our view, forest resource management would be best served neither by attempting to remain value neutral nor by adopting an enchanted view of natural resources but by engaging in productive conversation about which of the four models of stewardship proposed (if any) would constitute the optimal source of value with which forest management should be infused.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alan G. McQuillan, "Why We Should Not Seek to Reenchant Science," *Society of American Foresters 1999 Annual Convention Proceedings*, pp. 475-82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 476.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>4</sup> See David R. Griffin, ed., *The Reenchantment of Science* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Morris Berman, "The Re-enchantment of the World – I," in *Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy, or Tyrant*, ed. John Zerzan (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Griffin, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., "Ecology, Science, and Religion: Toward a Postmodern Worldview," (in Griffin, *Reenchantment*, pp. 99-113), p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> McQuillan, p. 479.