

BOOK REVIEW

Real Magic: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science, and a Guide to the Secret Power of the Universe by Dean Radin. New York: Harmony Books, 2018. 258 pp. \$16.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5247-5882-0.

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Given the wide range of mythical/occult lore, stage legerdemain, and popular fantasy-based fictional stereotypes that have long been associated with the term *magic* in human culture, it is quite possible that some academically minded readers may initially be put off by the title of this book. But these are not the kinds of magic that Dean Radin is talking about. Rather, he is subtly alluding to a certain class of seemingly extraordinary human experiences and abilities for which the exact underlying physical and biological mechanisms are not too well understood as of yet—namely, the experiences and abilities that may be classed as *psychic* (or *psi*). He focuses on examining three general subclasses which, in keeping with the theme of this book, are labeled in the parlance of magic: *force of will* (referring to psychokinesis, aka mind–matter interaction), *divination* (referring to extrasensory perception), and *theurgy* (referring to experiences related to survival after death).

Yet even with such clarification being made from the outset, there might still be readers who would wonder whether it is even a good idea to discuss psi phenomena in conjunction with magic, as some parapsychologists may be reminded of the effort once made by psychologist (and noted skeptic) James Alcock (1981) to portray an association between the two as being something fanciful and not fitting with the pursuit of science in his book *Parapsychology: Science or Magic?* Arguing on the basis of its seeming incompatibility with mainstream science, Alcock implied that psi is something that could be seen as being akin to occult conjuring, where one is able to spontaneously gain certain knowledge or mentally bring about certain event outcomes at will, without any apparent logic or reason. And as psychologist and psi researcher John Palmer (1983) had pointed out in his critical review of the book, Alcock even went on to imply that parapsychologists tend to act more like occult magicians than scientists, claiming that they are motivated by a predisposed belief in psi rather

than an objective search for facts and data-driven theory. In light of such blatant accusations having been made in the past, one might figure that parapsychologists would be wary of their subject matter being discussed or referred to in relation to magic again, in any shape or form.

However, Radin does give some reason for thinking that treading into such controversial territory again may not necessarily be such a bad thing. Although it may not initially be too clear just from the title, one does find throughout the course of the book that the term *magic* is being used here as a simple aesthetic metaphor (to refer to experiences and abilities that are not currently well understood, as mentioned), and not as an explanation. This use of aesthetic metaphor is likely meant to help make the book more appealing to a broader audience of lay readers, who might not otherwise be inclined to read a book that approaches the topic of psi from a scholarly angle.

In looking at the efforts being made by parapsychologists to try to better understand psi, Radin forms an analogy with the illuminating reemergence of esoteric knowledge when it is eventually rediscovered and reexamined by science, with illustrative examples being the practice of meditation and the use of cannabis for medical purposes—both previously shunned ideas in Western society that, upon closer empirical reexamination, ultimately have been found to have potential health benefits for some people. In each instance, something previously regarded as being mystical, unorthodox, or even nonsensical, was eventually found to have some degree of merit when deeper and persistent study was made of it (so as to better unlock its supposed esoteric “secrets”). Perhaps the same may eventually come of psi phenomena, Radin argues, in the way that certain domains of empirical study had partly developed and emerged from their semi-mystical counterparts (e.g., chemistry from alchemy).

Radin also points out that psi experiences can (and do) permeate human life, being reported by people who come from all aspects of society—which may even occasionally include those who are avowedly skeptical of such experiences, as illustrated by the unusual experience that skeptic Michael Shermer (2014) once admitted to, in which he and his then fiancé had apparently heard music being briefly emitted from a broken transistor radio that once belonged to his fiancé’s deceased grandfather (whom she wished could have attended their wedding). Shermer’s own prior attempts to repair the radio had been met with no success, and so it seemed quite unusual to him that the radio spontaneously began working on a particularly meaningful occasion for him and his fiancé—something which, he admitted, had “. . . rocked me back on my heels and shook my skepticism to its core” (Shermer 2014:97). On the surface, such experiences

would seem to pose quandaries that can make one wonder whether there might be something more to them, beyond mere superstition, coincidence, and misperception.

Radin goes on to make the point that magical thinking and beliefs can (and do) seep into human culture at times, even though they may not always be readily acknowledged for being what they are. An illustrative example he gives is the ritual significance underlying the performance of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic faith. Another example he cites is the use of magical or lucky charms, which some psychologists argue can potentially be beneficial for some people—not because they are imbued with any magical “power” or luck, but because they can act as symbolic objects which may help people to cope with difficult situations by focusing their thoughts on positive performance and well-being. The mere notion or belief in the owner’s mind that such items might carry some helpful “power” or luck simply goes toward facilitating the meaningful significance the owner ascribes to them as personal charms of benefit (Valdesolo 2010). Thus, one can argue that while they are not always acknowledged, magical thinking and beliefs are not always entirely dismissed by Western society’s populace, either.

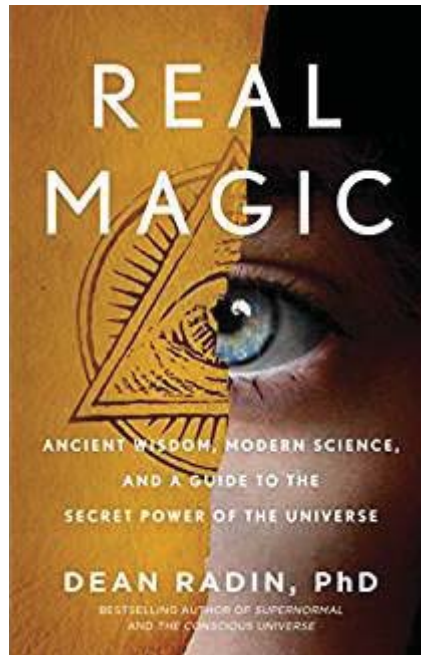
In relation to this, Radin also points out that there has been a fair degree of academic interest in the topic of magic, although this has most often come from the angle of studying it merely as a superstitious and ritualistic cultural belief, the practice of which encourages the mental illusion of control. Rarely, he states, do academics ever try to directly examine magic itself to see whether there might be something to it—presumably because doing so has largely been considered taboo, especially in Western academic circles.

Making such an examination is one of the purposes of Radin’s present book, and the longest section of it is devoted to reviewing the various lines of anecdotal and experimental evidence relating to force of will, divination, and theurgy (in the psi sense), including relevant findings from studies that Radin has conducted on these topics—among them, studies exploring possible quantum observer effects upon a double-slit interference pattern and studies examining how measures of belief in psi may correlate with performance on an online suite of ESP test programs (most *JSE* readers will likely be familiar with these studies, some of which have appeared in the pages of the *Journal* itself, and so their details won’t be covered here, for the sake of brevity). Radin describes them in a manner that is readable and easy for general lay readers to understand, though certain relevant statistical details are conveniently included in the text or in the endnotes section for academically minded readers who might like to know more about them.

More extensive reviews of the evidence for psi in general can also be found in Radin's previous books: *The Conscious Universe* (1997), *Entangled Minds* (2006), and *Supernormal* (2013).

Radin also devotes a chapter to looking at certain individual psychic claimants who might be considered (again keeping in line with the aesthetic theme of the book) "Merlin-class magicians," in the sense that their claimed experiences and abilities seem to clearly stand out from the relatively meager effects that are often observed with volunteers participating in laboratory studies. The three individuals he profiles here are St. Joseph of Copertino (particularly known for his claimed displays of levitation), the 19th-century physical medium D. D. Home, and the late psychic Ted Owens (known in part for his claimed displays of macroscopic psychokinesis). While the claims of each of these individuals are indeed noteworthy, one might wonder whether they would serve as particularly ideal illustrative "Merlin"-type figures from a purely empirical standpoint, considering that many of their claimed psychic feats (particularly those of St. Joseph and Owens) seem to rest largely upon observational anecdotes, which despite being fairly numerous, are not as reliable as findings gained through controlled laboratory studies (as Radin himself recognizes). Perhaps more fitting figures to have been profiled here in this regard include Eileen Garrett, Sean Lalsingh Harribance, and the late Ingo Swann, all of whom have produced statistically significant results on several occasions in psi experiments conducted by a range of researchers in various laboratory settings (in addition to each having their own respective collection of notable observational anecdotes).

Small portions of the book turn toward the practical end when Radin offers some basic guidelines for helping readers to facilitate the experience of psi within themselves. These guidelines are based on findings from various process-oriented experiments that seem to offer some possible insight into the mental states that may be conducive to psi functioning.



The states that Radin particularly emphasizes here are the focusing of attention and the engagement of intention, while also “quieting” the mind by steering it away from external distractions and analytical thinking. Three practical techniques Radin recommends for encouraging these states are meditation, the forming of goal-oriented affirmations, and the creation of sigils (symbolic designs that are made to reflect a desired goal). These same techniques have also been part of the traditional magic rituals of various cultures (e.g., meditation-like states are encouraged for inducing shamanistic vision quests, and affirmations and sigil creation have been ritually utilized in the crafting of spells and incantations), which ties them in with the overarching aesthetic theme of the book.

The final sections of the book are aimed at addressing, in a preliminary manner, the issue that Alcock (1981) had found so troubling: Does psi really contradict known science? As he had observed, one does appear to face problems when trying to make sense of psi from the materialist–reductionist worldview that has been widely adopted within mainstream science. But as Radin explains, while such a worldview has been found to account quite well for many of the tangible physical phenomena that take place in the surrounding macroscopic universe, it currently doesn’t seem to account as well for phenomena that are relatively intangible, which can include quantum-based physical phenomena on the subatomic scale, as well as subjective conscious experience and the various mental phenomena associated with it. This wouldn’t necessarily suggest that the materialist–reductionist worldview is wrong and needs to be rejected (as Radin put it, “it isn’t sensible to throw away what demonstrably works,” p. 186); rather, it would simply suggest that it is likely to be incomplete—or may even have its limitations of applicability. With this possibility in mind, Radin suggests that one may have to delve deeper in order to find the possible ways in which magic (in the psi sense) might perhaps fit into a future model of physical reality, and as possible bases for consideration he examines some of the post-materialistic theoretical and philosophical approaches (both current and still developing) that touch upon the possible intersection between consciousness and the physical world. These include certain approaches that are beginning to regard consciousness as being an inherently fundamental property of physical reality, perhaps being at the same basic and irreducible level as raw matter and energy. While such approaches are still relatively rudimentary in their formulation at present, Radin argues that their emergence into the scholarly domain is indicative of a notable shift in thinking about consciousness which may be important in the years to come. As he puts it:

Throughout science and scholarship a basic principle of the Perennial Philosophy—that consciousness is fundamental—is slowly becoming acceptable to talk about. Within science this notion tends to be cast into the more conventional language of information and mathematics, but the connection with consciousness is undeniable. After centuries of life-threatening suppression, the societal shift that now allows scientists and scholars to publicly discuss consciousness in a new light might seem like a trifling matter. But it's a positively astounding transformation. (p. 211)

And as Radin further argues, the “magic” of psi phenomena (in Alcock’s sense) starts to become much less mysterious when one carefully considers psi from these kinds of approaches, possibly making the conceptual gap between mind and matter seem not so vast. Whether these approaches will indeed be fruitful in the future remains to be seen.

With its aesthetic theme, numerous references to magic in popular culture, and colloquial tone and humor that slip into the text in several places, this book will likely appeal the most to lay readers from the general populace, helping to bring the field of parapsychology closer to them in a way that they can relate to. But academic readers may find something to ponder here as well, when it comes to the developments being made in the study of consciousness and considering where psi phenomena might fit into the mix. As Radin states in the end:

If we can get past the supernatural connotations, the religious fears and prohibitions, and the occult baggage, then through the scientific study of magic [in the psi sense] we have the potential to make rapid progress in gaining a better understanding of who and what we are. If we can't escape our past, then we may be running headlong into extinction. (p. 222)

And so if academic readers can also get past the title, they may actually find the content of this book to be rather thought-provoking and enlightening, in several respects.

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