

Abracadabra Psi?

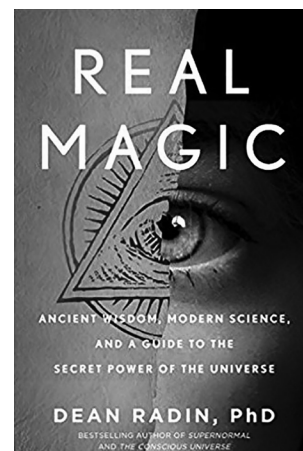
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A Review of
*Real Magic: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science,
and a Guide to the Secret Power of the Universe,*
by Dean Radin.

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You have managed to get a ticket to attend an unconventionally advertised “The Rite of Saturn” and arrive to Caxton Hall wearing black and keeping silent as requested. The convener, “P,” and his acolytes perform a ritual very loosely based on the Greek Eleusinian mysteries, in which while sitting on cushions you are offered a drink spiked with psychoactive substances. You are then taken into a dimly lit room where a group of robed, masked enthroned beings recite overwrought poetry and make invocations to the Gods, before one of them plays the violin (Brown, 1978). Aleister Crowley, “P,” “The Great Beast,” the most influential 20th Century practitioner of magic (or magick, as he spelled it following Old English usage) is just beginning his (in)famous career as a magician, seeking to bend the fabric of the universe to his will.



Decades later, as mentioned in *Real Magic*, Dean Radin and collaborators conduct carefully designed experiments to attest whether individuals’ conscious intention can affect the microscopic behavior of quantum systems using double-slit and other optical systems. Statistical analyses reveal that the results differ significantly from randomness, although the purported effect of the intention is very small (pp. 101-102).

At first blush, there would seem to be nothing in common between these two events, other perhaps than the fact that Radin was also a violin player in his youth. Yet, first impressions can be misleading. The prototypical “bad boy” Crowley wanted to have “scientific,” operational descriptions of magical ministrations as precise as possible: “I concentrated my mind upon a white radiant triangle in whose

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center was a shining eye, for 22 minutes and 10 seconds, my attention wandering 45 times' is a scientific and valuable statement. 'I prayed fervently to the Lord for the space of many days' means anything or nothing" (1901, p. 123). And, according to Radin's new book, *Real Magic*, parapsychology (psi) and magic share the essential truth of a "secret power of the universe," as the subtitle contends. Crowley defined magic as "a question of discovering and employing hitherto unknown forces in nature," 1929, p. 16).

Radin has an impressive track record of creative and successful experimentation in psi, so what he writes on the topic definitely deserves careful consideration. He states that "I've been studying magic from a scientific perspective for about forty years" (p. 11), and describes magic as involving "mental influence of the physical world, perception of events distant in space or time, and interaction with nonphysical entities" (p. 1). Defining magic this way makes it fit perfectly with the main themes of parapsychological research: psychokinesis (anomalous influence and force), ESP (or anomalous cognition), and research on survival, but it ignores the vast differences within the vast domain of magic, even if we circumscribe it to the Western tradition.

If one follows Radin's definition of magic, of course it makes sense to consider psi research as referring to it, and there are some commonalities, between magical practice and the little we know of psi phenomena. For both, the development of focus of attention, fantasy, and sustained practice are recommended (Baptista, Derakhshani, & Tressoldi, 2015; Cavendish, 1967), and rituals may help focus attention, increase belief, and intensify emotions not only in magic but also in psi research (e.g., Nelson, 2008), and other human activities (Cardeña & Cousins, 2010).

Nonetheless, the similarities only go so far. To point but to one important difference, laboratory evidence has provided evidence that a person's intention can affect the physiology of someone else at a distance (Schmidt, 2015), but this effect is typically very small and inconsistent, and in no way provides a basis for what Wilson (1973, p. 345) justifiedly described as the "futile and rather silly business" of the "psychic battles" in which the esoterists Boullan and Guaita engaged at the end of the 19th century, nor to the magician Lévi's (1896) proclamation that through magic the practitioner can become omnipotent. Unqualifiedly equating parapsychology and magic also plays into the hands of those who dismiss parapsychology as pseudoscientific (e.g., Alcock, 2005).

For most of *Real Magic*, there is no discussion of the extent to which the evidence from psi research both does and does not support what is assumed in magical or New Age practices and beliefs. An important instance occurs on page 71, in which Radin lists various books that posit that asking the universe for something and believing in it vehemently will make it manifest, without much discussion. With respect to this proposition, not only is there the fact that all of us have had strong wishes to, for instance, save someone from suffering or dying, and have seen the futility of our wishes, but there is also the issue that it is morally bankrupt because it implies that the millions of victims of horrible diseases, genocides, and more quotidian cruelties just did not ask or believe strongly enough to avoid their excruciating fates (Cardeña, 2011). It is not until pages 212-213 that Radin discusses why personal dreams do not "come true, every time," because of "reality inertia, lack of talent, and the unconscious," but isn't this cosmically short-changing (to use a language similar to that of the book's subtitle) the presence of

suffering and cruelty in life, no matter what we wish? Or that someone's "dream" may be precisely to crush someone else's "dream" (or life)?

Radin excels, as expected, in reviewing the literature on the supportive evidence for psi phenomena and their connection to intentionality, to which he has made many important contributions. This, and his discussion of the effect of consciousness (or, more accurately, mentality, since some psi effects are nonconscious; e.g., Stanford, 2015) on reality are the strongest aspects of the book, but Radin's grasp of other disciplines is tenuous. In one case, he writes on p. 170, while discussing the 17th century ostensible levitator St. Joseph of Copertino, that "The Catholic Church was the principal authority among European nations," as if there had not been Protestant countries and communities at that time. Or, when discussing anthropology, he cites Kroeber's 1923 work belittling the belief in magic (in Radin, p. 28) and then jumps all the way to a 1982 paper by Winkelman discussing psi phenomena and anthropology, failing to mention many discussions in anthropology in the interim that were at least respectful of magic and even mentioned psi phenomena (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Marwick, 1982; for a review see Luke, 2010). And mostly dismissing Europe in the Middle Ages as akin to a "post-apocalyptic zombie movie" (p. 46) may make some readers smile, but will make others with a knowledge of history wince. It may be argued that these problems are tangential to the main theme in *Real Magic* and that this is a book written for a general audience, which I can grant, but they also diminish the overall trustworthiness of the book.

Real Magic includes a chapter on the history of magic and references a few recent, and typically dry, academic works (e.g., Davies, 2012), but the interested reader will get a much more comprehensive and entertaining account of the history, variety, and rationale for magic in an extraordinary and copiously illustrated encyclopedia, which had already discussed some parallels between psi phenomena and magic (Cavendish, 1970a, b). The central tenet of *Real Magic* certainly deserves a hearing, but a more nuanced approach and consideration of both similarities and differences between psi and magic would have strengthened it considerably. Yes, the proposal of universal interconnectedness in some interpretations of magic (e.g., the Emerald Tablet), quantum mechanics (e.g., D'Espagnat, 2006), and parapsychology are worth considering, but other aspects of magic such as the belief that a magician can amass great power (beyond that explainable by ordinary psychological dynamics) through the use of secret lore have little to no basis on reality. Which, coming back to the beginning of this review, helps explain why the powerful "P," Aleister Crowley, ended up destitute and dependent on drugs and donors (Wilson, 1973). Caveat, magician's apprentice!

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