
Between the Astral Plane and Scholasticism: A Parisian Interview with the expert on *virtutes occultae* Nicolas Weill-Parot

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Introduction

Nicolas Weill-Parot is the perfect example of the very rare and distinguished scientists ceaselessly investigating the subject of astral images (talismans porting simple or sophisticated motives of the universe), the relation of medieval science to its limits and also undeterminable structures seen as *virtutes occultae*. He is a former student of École Normale Supérieure of Ulm street. He defended his thesis on “*astral images*” in 1998 at University Paris 10 (Nanterre).² He then delivered his lectures during 1999–2011 at University Paris 8 (Saint-Denis) as *maître de conférences* and during 2011–2016 at Université Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne as *professeur*. Since 2016, he has been a professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris.

He there continues in the prestigious French tradition of historians of science, giving Tuesday lectures after Danielle Jacquart (*Histoire des sciences au Moyen Âge*) (Beaujouan, 1992; Jacquart, 1998). Nicolas Weill-Parot is an author of articles, critical editions and important monographies in the intellectual history and the history of sciences cited throughout this text. He got famous by developing the conceptual theory of relations between science and magic and then he progressively orientated towards the “blind points” of medieval science itself: hidden natural properties, magnetic attraction and theoretical implications of vacuum. Let us ponder together the medieval world of astral magic and disciplines related to the *virtutes occultae*.

¹ Important note of ZV: Revised in April 2017, because Nicolas Weill-Parot changed his University. I have edited and annotated this dialogue and provided space to N. Weill-Parot, to rephrase some of his answers and correct some of the contextual notes. Some of the responses changed the order of the original interview, or were omitted by common consensus with Nicolas Weill-Parot for reasons of simplicity and brevity.

² Weill-Parot (1998).

Academic Background and General Notions of the Field

“I don’t believe in astrology nor in magic and alchemy.”

Academic Study, Esotericists and Demi-Savants

Zdenko: The topic of magic, alchemy divination and occultism is in our culture many times not adequately represented, especially when we speak about Medieval Ages setting. It is largely popularised in the fictional, in the semi-fictional also as in serious genres. From literature to new media like movies and computer games, I see how the very imagery of medieval and pre-Raphaelites’ topos together are projected further into the digital age by the obsessive cultural fascination with obscurity, esotericism and hidden knowledge. Could the serious work and contribution of medievalist be misinterpreted when they are carried over to a broader audience?

Nicolas: Yes, it can be a problem: when you say now that you are working on magic or astrology, the first reaction of the interlocutor is to ask why, and he supposes that you are in some way or another some kind of esotericist. So, it is quite hard to explain that a scholar can make serious studies in all these fields. There is very good sentence of Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, often quoted by scholars dealing with astrology or magic: *“On ne perd pas son temps en recherchant à quoi d’autres ont perdu le leur,”* i.e. trying to understand an activity on which people have wasted their time is not a waste of time.³ I think, it is very important to underline that.

However, it is a very complicated and intricate question. The point is that for a long time these fields have been intensively studied by many *demi-savants*, half learned persons and this is very dangerous. I often mention these two paradoxical examples: on the one hand, the French translation of the great book by Frances Yates on Giordano Bruno and Hermeticism has been edited by an esoteric publisher [Dervy] (Yates, 1988); on the other hand, the dreadful and pro-esotericist book by Serge Hutin on medieval alchemy has been published in the serious and widespread collection [of Hachette’s] *La vie quotidienne* (Hutin, 1995)!

Personally, I want to make clear that I am completely rationalistic: I don’t believe in astrology nor in magic and alchemy! However, I must admit that there are some very serious researchers in astrology who believe in astrology, but when they are studying medieval texts they are working as scientists. So, it is fine. But we must be very cautious.

Nevertheless, quite early in the twentieth century, from 1923 to 1958, Lynn Thorndike drew attention to the importance of magic in the history of medieval science and culture (Thorndike, 1923–1958). In French universities nowadays, such topics are no longer regarded as suspect or vain or marginal. Magic, indeed, is an important and serious subject in order to understand the scientific or intellectual framework of the Middle Ages.

³ Cit. of Bouché-Leclercq (1899: ix). Cf. for overview of one century of discussion also Oestmann, Rutkin and von Stuckrad (2005: 1–4ff).

Becoming an Expert

Zdenko: Mr. Nicolas Weill-Parot, when I first heard your name, it was also mentioned to me that you were an expert on medieval astral talismans. How could one become a renowned expert on such a topic? How did you find your way into such study, and how long did it take?

Nicolas: As far as I can remember, I think, I was probably attracted by the study of the fascinating and mysterious irrationality of this field of thought and practice: magic. But finally, by studying the way that medieval philosophers, theologians and scientists built rational models in order to integrate or reject talismanic magic, I discovered the fascinating world of medieval scholastic rationality. After that, I have gradually moved from the external borders of the science, i.e. magic, to the internal borders, namely problems related to medieval physics and natural philosophy, i.e. science.

Zdenko: Thank you. We will be speaking about this further. Now, just to make it clear, how much of research it took in terms of academic work?

Nicolas: I began my research when I was a young student, in the academic year 1989–1990, when I was admitted in the Ecole normale supérieure; I wrote my “maîtrise”, i.e. approximately what we call now a “Master 1.” My supervisor was André Vauchez, the great historian of medieval spirituality.⁴ The topic of this first research was how and why the church decided in the first half of the fourteenth century that magic, ritual magic, was heretical. Later, after the “agrégation d’histoire” (a selective exam in history), I wrote a “DEA” (we would say now “Master 2”), on the argumentation by Pierre d’Ailly on astrology.⁵ Pierre d’Ailly was an intellectual of the late Middle Ages who moved from a standard opposition to astrology to a support of a Christian astrology. But I had to choose another topic for my Ph.D., because an American scholar had just defended her Ph.D. on Pierre d’Ailly and astrology (Smoller, 1994). At that time there was no internet, so it was very hard to know all the Ph.D. topics which had been undertaken elsewhere, especially on the other side of the ocean. But finally, it was a good thing, because I was more satisfied with my new field of research: astral magic. The starting point was the *Opus praeclarum de imaginibus astrologicis*, a work from 1496 in Valencia (Torrella, 2008). The treatise was dedicated to the future King Ferdinand el Católico [Ferdinand II of Aragon, 1452–1516]. The treatise was a long discussion on whether “astrological images” were licit and scientific. From this treatise, my research extended itself to the whole issue of “astrological images” in the Middle Ages. The “astrological images” problem belongs at the same time to magic and science, so that I found myself in the field of the history of science, where I met such prominent masters as Guy Beaujouan and Danielle Jacquart.

⁴ Weill-Parot (1990).

⁵ Weill-Parot (1992).

Zdenko: How do you cope with your speciality in “astrological images” and scholastic science?

Nicolas: My approach is a conceptual history of the science (I borrow this locution from Edward Grant, the great historian of physical science in the Middle ages) (Grant, 1981; 1987 and 2010). I try to understand the evolution of concepts and reasoning. So, it is a very internal doctrinal approach, and therefore I used to work quite often with historians of philosophy.

Zdenko: With your specialisation, what kind of seminars did you teach at university to students and scholars?

Nicolas: When I was at University Paris 8 and at University Paris-Est Créteil, I taught mainly medieval history, and I tried also to give my students some specialized lessons on history of medieval science. But as far as my actual research was concerned, from 2007 to 2011, Jean-Patrice Boudet and I organised a seminar on “Magic and science in the Middle Ages,” where many international scholars were invited to talk on this topic. Later, from 2012 to 2016, Joël Chandelier and I organised a new seminar at the École normale supérieure (Paris), but the topic was different. It was about “scientific argumentation in the Middle Ages” (Chandelier, 2007); for four years in this seminar we consecutively invited specialists in the history of science, medicine and philosophy. Now I am professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and my seminar deals with medieval science in the West. In this first year, 2016–2017, I dwell upon two themes: first, “scientific utopia,” and second, “physics and logic.” My second year 2017–2018 is devoted to two themes “Flying in the Middle Ages” and “Medieval commentaries of Aristotle’s Physics in Central Europe”.

Astral Images and Talismans: The Conceptual History of Occult, Experimenta and Adressativity

“Reason was perfectly adequate with nature.”

Academic Field and Astral Images

Zdenko: Academic studies in the fields of magic and alchemy, have before been given an impetus from the larger, we could say anthropological, interest of historians. Mainly in the ‘70s, there was an intensive debate connected to all notions of metaphysical cultural phenomena followed by a later decline. However, since the ‘90s the study of our topics have again risen to prominence. Reading your text from a conference in 1999⁶, I was startled by how the field looked back then, compared to how it looks nowadays, almost twenty years later. Has the field grown more systematic the ‘90s?

⁶ Weill-Parot (2004).

Nicolas: When I was just about to finish my “maîtrise” (Master 1), Prof. André Vauchez said to me, “Oh, I have just received this book from one of my American friends. His name is Richard Kieckhefer!” This book was obviously very important (Kieckhefer, 1989). It was certainly the main moving cause of the renewal of the study of magic in the years around 2000. However, whereas Kieckhefer’s book provides a very important approach to the fields of the religious, cultural and social history of magic, my Ph.D. dealing with “astrological images” followed quite a different path. My approach was conceptual and intellectual. I have tried to understand the intellectual meaning of such a concept, i.e. “astrological image”, from within different intellectual frames: theology, philosophy, medicine, astrology from the 12th century to the Renaissance. Both approaches are useful, indeed. The point is that I have noticed that “astrological images” were primarily a concept. This concept of “astrological images” had to be distinguished from the practical use of the astrological talismans.

The “astrological image” was an apologetic concept. This concept was coined by the anonymous author of the *Speculum astronomiae* (the middle of 13th century), who wanted to make possible a licit and natural astral magic according to the orthodox framework (Paravicini Bagliani, 2001; cf. Zambelli, 1992). The travel of this concept through the different fields of intellectual medieval thought was a good way to reach the meaning of the history of this topic. Therefore, the only legitimate approach was here that of an intellectual history, a conceptual history of science.

A few scholars, especially some Anglo-Saxon researchers, wrote that this intellectualistic approach was inadequate, because in their view the ultimate explanation is always social. But I think they are a bit blinded by both ideology and fashion. It is striking just to see how this Anglo-Saxon academic world is sometimes – not always – influenced by a kind of cryptomarxist sociology! Of course, social and cultural approaches could be very useful and necessary, but it depends on the topic. For every topic the historian must identify the relevant explanatory parameters; and these are not always sociological! I think that my conceptual approach was very appropriate to my very specific topic. My book of 988 pages shows, I hope, that there was much to say according to this conceptual approach.

Zdenko: The question is whether we should still read Kieckhefer now, or more appropriately, how we should read him?

Nicolas: Yes, when a student is interested in the issue of magic in the Middle Ages, I always give the advice to begin with Kieckhefer. Now, we have a more comprehensive approach with Jean-Patrice Boudet’s *Science and Nigromance* (Boudet, 2006). I think that both books are very good introductions to this field. However, Kieckhefer’s *Magic in the Middle Ages* is now a bit old; since 1989, a lot of work has been done on magical sources. Kieckhefer himself, with his second book on *Forbidden Rites*, has provided very important new material (Kieckhefer, 1997).

Zdenko: As was said before in relation to concepts, you have written an important work on “astrological images”, but what are they precisely?

Nicolas: To answer to this question, I will give three definitions, from a broader one to the most specific one. What is a talisman? It is a magical artificial object: a seal, a figurine or other handmade objects allegedly endowed with magical power. What is an astrological talisman? It is a magical object in the making of which astrology plays a role, whether because the talisman displays a figure similar to the figure of a star or a constellation, or because it has been made under an appropriate constellation, or for both reasons. What is an “astrological image”? It is a very special kind of astrological talisman. I have tried to show that “astrological image” meant a concept coined in the middle of the thirteenth century in the anonymous *Speculum astronomiae* ([ps.] Albertus Magnus, 1977). Besides “images” which are condemned as evil and whose power comes from demons, there exist, says the anonymous author, “astrological images”, very special kind of astrological talismans in the making of which there is nothing demonic. The “astrological image” is supposed to derive its whole power only from the natural influence of the stars, i.e. exclusively from the stars and not from the demons. Hence, an “astrological image” is an idea of a talisman either licit from the theological point of view, and “scientific” from the philosophical point of view. This was a remarkable concept, which led me to comprehensive research on the relationships between magic and science in the Middle Ages.

Speculum Astronomiae and Magister Speculi

Zdenko: We could go one step back to *Speculum Astronomiae* ([ps.] Albertus Magnus, 1977).⁷ How possibly did *Magister Speculi*, change the medieval field of magic? [His classification of images as abominable, detestable and licit and his notion of scientific talismans and mediation between *ars* and *natura*.]

Nicolas: The *Speculum astronomiae* has been ascribed for a long time to Albert the Great. This attribution can no longer be supported, especially since the codicological study by Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (2001). Anyway, the *Speculum astronomiae* is a normative bibliography on all the parts of the science of stars, namely astronomy and astrology. When the anonymous author deals with astrological elections, i.e. the choice of the right astrological moment to undertake a specific action, he writes that the “science of images” is put under the part dedicated to astrological elections. But, he says, this does not concern every “image,” but only “astrological images”. The *Magister Speculi* makes the distinction between, on the one hand, evil images, i.e. “abominable” and “less prejudicial, but nevertheless detestable,” namely, as David Pingree (1987) put it, respectively hermetic and solomonic images and, on the other hand, “astrological images”, images based on purely natural astral influences. This new category of “astrological image” was quite influential in the Middle Ages. The *Magister Speculi* gives a clear definition of a concept which was discussed by many medieval scholars. Albert the Great [c. 1200–1280] was a supporter of such an idea of the purely astrological talisman, while Thomas Aquinas [1225–1274] was an unwavering opponent. At the end of the fourteenth century and especially in the Quattrocento, supporters of a new and

⁷ Cf. with same edition in Zambelli (1992).

very daring magic, e. g. Antonio da Montolmo [f. 1360– after 1393]⁸ and Marsilio Ficino [1433–1499],⁹ used this category of “astrological images” in order to hide magical practices which were not deprived of “addressativity.”

Addressativity and Scientific Thinking in the Middle Ages

Zdenko: What is medieval argumentation in your opinion?

Nicolas: Scholastic authors primarily used arguments in order to rationalise and to solve any intellectual challenge. This is obvious in the history of medieval science. What is science in the middle ages? Basically, it is not experimentation (with few exceptions, such as Pierre de Maricourt [fl. 1269]). It is rather the shaping of a rational framework in order to solve any issue. In other words, it is an attempt to give rational explanations for any natural phenomena, with systematic requirements (I give this definition in the wake of a definition given by Danielle Jacquart). Therefore, argumentation is a central issue in medieval science.

Zdenko: When speaking of astrological talismans and “astrological images” which are not influenced by forces other than the astral ones, how did contemporary medieval people differentiate them from other works, for example those of the Devil, or some occult and neutral forces, like the platonic demons of the stars?

Nicolas: I have coined a basic concept, in French “*destinativité*”, in English “addressativity”. This is an important criterion in medieval magic. I mean by “addressativity” the explicit or implicit calling to spirits, through inscriptions, rituals, words, incantations and so on. All these practices were regarded as mere signs by such theologians as Thomas Aquinas. And obviously a sign is always oriented to an intelligent *addressee*. That is the reason I have called this concept *addressativity* because it is addressed to an *addressee* (in French “*destinativité*” related to a “*destinataire*”). According to this criterion, an “astrological image” is actually a non-addressative image.¹⁰

Zdenko: Is this concept of *addressativity* more emic, or etic term? Did we not construct it from the after conceptualisation of their thinking?

Nicolas: I have used the concept “addressativity” in order to grasp the essential criterion of the theological debate about magic, especially talismanic magic, in the Middle Ages. Previously, some scholars had suggested other words or concepts: “demonic” (Walker, 1958), “noetic” (Copenhaver, 1984, cf. Copenhaver, 2015), but they are somehow ambiguous. The concept of “*addressativity*” focuses on the problem of the relation to the intelligence whom the magician addresses through his magical practice. For the standard theological viewpoint (e.g. that of Thomas Aquinas), an “*addressative*” magic is always a demonic image, because the angels

⁸ See notably: Weill-Parot (2003; 2012).

⁹ See Weill-Parot (2002d)

¹⁰ Weill-Parot (2002a)

will not involve themselves in such practices – note that neutral spirits do not exist according to orthodox theology. Note also that the astral spirits invoked in texts of astral magic coming from the Far East were regarded by Latin theologians as evil sublunary demons: astral demons are impossible within the Christian framework, because the supreme world, in contrast to the sublunary world,¹¹ is the world of God (cf. Weill-Parot, 2002c).¹²

Zdenko: In your recent book [which is also your habilitation] you proceed further with the conceptualisation of scholastic scientific theories. How do you see the *Points aveugles de la nature* (Weill-Parot, 2013) today in relation to your research ?

Nicolas: I have gradually moved from the study of relationships between scientific rationality and the external borders – magic, astrology, to the study of the relationships between a scientific rationality and internal borders. By internal borders I mean challenges which come from Nature itself. My last book focuses on three issues (*ibid.*). First, occult properties, i.e. powers that cannot be explained by the combination of primary *obvious qualities* called warm, cold, moist, dry. Second, magnetic attraction, an action that seems to challenge the contact between mover and moved – a necessary requirement according to Aristotle’s natural philosophy. Third, the abhorrence of a vacuum: in order to prevent the existence of a vacuum the “universal nature” compels natural things to act in ways that are opposite to their “particular natures”.

Through precise analysis of scientific sources, notably commentaries on Aristotle’s *Physics*, I tried to point out that there was in the scholastic research, especially between the 1250s and the 1320s, what I called real concrete natural rationalism. There was an eminent tendency to think that the reason – that means Aristotelian philosophy and science – could actually *hic et nunc* explain all the natural world. What was unknown was encapsulated in such concepts as the *occult properties* or *universal nature*.

Experiment, Experience, Empirica, Experimenta

Zdenko: Was the idea of real experimentation accepted in this form of scientific thinking? It was always a thought experiment, declining to conduct it in the real world, no matter how easy it was – like the famous experiment with the magnet.

¹¹ Heavenly, world of spheres.

¹² Ed. note: It seems that astral magic, or mages operating under a hermetic framework apprehended God’s power in supralunary spheres, from which „fallen“ and neutral angels were expelled. However, mages using a more salomonic worldview were more „grounded“. They did not classify the world in the manner of supralunary and sublunary cosmology and ignored this kind of theologico-cosmological classification for their purposes.

Nicolas: There were some experiments in the Middle ages, even in the very modern sense of the word, but there were very few, for example one by Pierre de Maricourt.¹³

Zdenko: And how about the naturalistic movement amongst certain philosophers which you have studied? Did they themselves do experiments?

Nicolas: No. Doing actual experiments, in the modern sense, was not the prevailing tendency because the truth was given by reason. There was a sort of trust in reason. Reason was perfectly adequate with nature. There was, we could say, a kind of superposition between nature and reason, especially during the rationalistic period between the 1250s and the 1320s. Specifically, “experiment” was important in Aristotelian science, but not with the modern meaning of experimental device; “experiment” meant the sensible experience of things, the everyday contact through our five senses. Aristotle thought that all knowledge comes primarily from this kind of experience. It is different from the modern experimental device.

Zdenko: Actually *experimenta* were widespread in a different kind of literature. Practical “grimoires” and especially nigromantic collections were full of them. What do they mean in this specific context?

Nicolas: We find, notably, in magical recipes such wordings as *expertum est* or *expertus sum*. These words have a different meaning. *Expertum est* usually means: the efficiency of the process which I have described is testified in texts produced by ancient authorities. We could say that it is a textual experiment. But, of course, we cannot exclude the fact that sometimes there were some direct experiments of such processes. Nevertheless, when it is obviously magic we are allowed to be sceptical.

Classification of Magic and Occultism

Zdenko: We touched on this before, but we should clarify it. This is a special issue on magic, alchemy and occultism. Apart from alchemy, would we be able to find them so clearly classified in the later middle ages as they are generally nowadays? There were then, just as now, different ways of “thinking about”, “staging” and “doing” magic, and also different types of occultism. How might we distinguish among them?

Nicolas: In fact, I wouldn’t define magic in this way. But I myself have a definition.

¹³ Petrus Peregrinus’s famous epistle about experimentation with a magnet in the process of developing a dry compass, 1269 (*Petrus Peregrinus, Epistola Petri Peregrini de Maricourt ad Sygerum de Foucaucourt, militem, de magnete*).

Every artificial practice producing wonders in which the cause is hidden (two important features: artificial and hidden).

This definition is very comprehensive, there can be three different hidden causes. First, the hidden cause can be a mere trick: this is what we now call prestidigitation. Second, the hidden cause can be a natural hidden cause, like an occult property, and this is natural magic. Third, the hidden cause can be a spirit: either a demon – this is demonic magic, nigromancy – or an angel – then it is theurgy. We must keep in mind that the definition of magic is a matter of point of view: of the magician, of the philosopher and of the theologian. This definition includes all these different points of view. This is its great advantage.

Practices

“Texts dealing with astrological talismans imply a lot of ‘addressative’ practices.”

Usage of Astral Images

Zdenko: When we step out from purely intellectual debate, where did the astrological talismans in the Middle Ages belong? Were they magic, alchemy, divination, ritual magic, demonic pact, or nigromancy? Where did they originate and how were they used? Were the imagination and ligation somehow connected in Middle Ages?

Nicolas: Astrological talismans obviously belong to magic. Defining the kind of magic to which such or such practice falls under such or such category of magic is a matter of point of view. Supporters of “astrological images” argued that they came under a purely natural kind of astral magic. But actually, texts dealing with astrological talismans imply a lot of “addressative” practices: the magical practitioner assumed such astral magic required a call to specific spirits. Sometimes the magician claimed that these spirits were good spirits or that he was not serving demons but, quite the contrary, he was compelling the demons with the help of God. A theologian like Thomas Aquinas, argued that all astrological talismans were demonic, that they were based on an explicit or implicit call to demons.

But as to the second part of your question, there was no connection in the Middle Ages between astral magic and alchemy.

What are the goals of the magician who makes an astrological talisman? Well, these are the general dreams of humankind, i.e. power, wealth, love etc. For instance in the Thābit ibn Qurrah [c. 826–901], *De imaginibus* (1960), there is an image made in order to destroy a city, another to make two people love each other.

Zdenko: You are right. Reading Thābit ibn Qurrah, and his splendid astral magic recipes to destroy cities, reminds me of the similar salomonic *experimenta* of the nigromantic Munich manuscript [München, Staatsbibliothek, Clm 849, publ. in (Kieckhefer, 1997)]. After this, one begins to ponder the practical results

of such fantastical claims. How were these recipes adopted? Were they actually tried, or were they inted as pure fantasy? Do we have some notions about known experimentation?

Nicolas: A magical experiment written at the end of the fourteenth century is supposed to have been performed by Tommaso da Pizzano [fl. 1310–1389], father of Christine de Pizan, the famous writer [1364–1430]. Tommaso da Pizzano was a well-known astrologer. He was invited to France by Charles V [1338–1380]. This magical experiment can be found in two manuscripts, and it was probably written by the magician Antonio da Montolmo [c. 1330–c. 1396]. In *De imaginibus* ascribed to Thābit ibn Qurrah (lat.: Thebit) there is a talisman which is made in order to remove scorpions from a place. Now, in the context of the Hundred Years War, Tommaso replaced scorpions with Englishmen. He decided to use this image to repel them.¹⁴ But is the story real and somehow modified or is it a legend told some years after the death of Tommaso da Pizzano? We don't know. But it is an example of practical use. This experiment is part of a series of three experiments: in the last one the narrator – probably Antonio da Montolmo – recounts his own experiment with the same kind of astrological talisman. But something has changed: the anonymous author of the *Speculum astronomiae* had quoted Thebit's *De imaginibus* in order to epitomise the licit concept of “astrological image”, i.e. a “non-addressative” kind of astrological talisman. Now the narrator – Antonio da Montolmo – adds names of angels to be said in order to perform the magical operation, therefore he adds some “addressative” elements to a text which was almost the only one without any “addressative” element. This is a complete corruption of the meaning of the concept of “astrological image” coined in the *Speculum astronomiae*!

Ligatio and Imaginatio, Intentionality

Zdenko: And the last part of this question: how were *imaginatio* and *ligatio* connected in the Middle Ages? Was there common anything at all?

Nicolas: *Ligatio* means binding in its concrete meaning and in its figurative meaning. You can bind a man in such a way that he can no longer have sexual intercourse. Sometimes the magician performs an operation which signifies this, for instance, making a knot.

On the other hand, *imaginatio* can be a way to perform natural magic. According to the Aristotelian framework, the power of the imagination is always a power on the body of the same internal body; but some models derived from such authors as Avicenna put forward the idea that the imagination of a man can act upon another man.

¹⁴ Nicolas. Weill-Parot (2002b: 605–8 [edition of the text of this experiment]). The text of the experiment was translated into French by Jean-Patrice Boudet, dated by astrological notions to 25.10.1375 before 7 AM.

Magic, the Church and Heresy

Zdenko: We mentioned magicians, theologians, lay people, and also kings. However, what did the enforcing powers of the Church, such as the Inquisition and the Pope, think of this practices?

Nicolas: My first research was dealing with the moment when Pope John XXII decided to establish a committee of experts (theologians and legal experts) to decide whether some practices, like the blessing and the use of the images, were heretical practices. This is the first time when this question was raised. The Pope obviously expected the experts to give an affirmative answer, so that these magicians could be prosecuted by a very efficient procedure, namely the Inquisition. Some years ago, Alain Boureau studied all of this affair anew (Boureau, 2004a, 2004b). There were some trials during the pontificates of Popes John XXII and Benedict XII. But after that, the prosecutions of magicians as heretics almost ceased, with few exceptions shown by Nicolas Eymerich, the Catalan inquisitor, a zealous and obsessed man. Considering a magician who was already regarded as a demon worshipper as an heretic is quite strange, since it is a way of saying that the heretic is worse than the Devil himself (Weill-Parot, 2017).

Zdenko: Also, Jean Gerson [1363–1429] at the University of Paris objected to the use of magic and especially astral images. What was the precise context of his objections?

Nicolas: Jean Gerson fought against the use of the Seal of Lion, the most widespread “astrological image” used against kidney aches. Some learned physicians made use of “astrological images”, more precisely astrological seals with medical goals, such as The Seal of Lion against kidney pains, the Seal of the Fish against gout, the Seal of the Holder of the Serpent against poison. In truth, the use of “astrological seals” was not an important part of normal medicine, but a marginal one; it was an empirical process. Such a prominent physician as Arnald of Villanova [c. 1240–1311] mentions this process several times and explains its efficiency through the doctrine of “occult properties,” an important concept which comes from medical theory and natural philosophy. We also know that Arnald of Villanova, in 1310, used a Seal of Lion order to cure Pope Boniface VIII from his kidney stones. However, in the exact context to which you refer, i.e. the text written in 1428 by Jean Gerson against the use of the Seal of Lion, this seems to be, first of all, a settlement of scores between two academic factions at the university of Montpellier. Jean Gerson was probably helping his friend Jean Piscis [13??–1433], chancellor of this university, against his enemies Jacques Angeli [c. 1390–1455, who became the chancellor after death of J. de Piscis] and Nicolas Colne de Saxonia [fl. 1383–1428], who probably used this medical astrological seal (Weill-Parot, 2002b, pp. 597–601).

The Connection of Science and Magic

Zdenko: We still have plenty of dirty academic competition today. However, is there something like pattern? Could we say, that many of the medieval and early modern scientific figures interested in natural processes [and medicine] were almost always somehow connected with magic, especially natural magic, or profound apocalyptic thinking on the other side?

Nicolas: Well, I am not sure that we can assert such a very general idea on this point. Some of these men, of course, in modern times were interested in magic, or alchemy. What I can say is that in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance the point was to define where nature ends. Where does the scientist go out science? The medieval natural philosopher or the physician was always aware of the borders of the natural order and the risks of slipping out of scientific rationality. Such thinkers as Albert the Great found a space for natural magic, that is a “scientific magic”, assuming at the same time the requirement of rational explanation (i.e. science) and a part of definitive concealment of the cause (i.e. magic), whereas Roger Bacon [c. 1214–1294] rejects such a concept, since he assumes that his “experimental science” will be able to shed more light over natural and artificial causes, according to an open concept of science (Weill-Parot, 2006). This is two different ways of understanding the borders between what is science and what is outside science.

Last Remarks

“What questions should we now pose?”

Other approaches to Specific Subject. Regulative ideas.

Zdenko: What do you think about the application of anthropological, sociological, psychological and other approaches to medievalist material? What are the possibilities? And second, maybe a much more important question: what are the limits of such a comparative approach?

Nicolas: All approaches can be useful. The point is that first we have to read precisely the text, to try to understand each text in its own context. Then we can borrow some concepts from some other discipline. But first of all, the researcher must try to understand the text very pragmatically.

Unfortunately, sometimes some researchers, obsessed by such and such a trendy sociological theory, want to make the material (i.e. the primary sources) match with the pattern derived from such and such a fashionable theory. It is a very dangerous approach! My advice: please do not undertake studies in magic, science etc. with the obsession of categories borrowed from sociology and the social sciences! Of course, all scholars have assumptions in their minds, but their task – at least as a “regulative idea” – is the following: to try to understand the primary sources according to their own framework. If, then, the scholar wants to use such and such a theory as a possible tool to go further, it is all right. I myself have found

some interesting tools in order to understand rationality in works by the great sociologist Raymond Boudon as well as in an important book by Boudon's disciple, Pascal Sanchez, on rational belief in magic (Boudon, 2012; Sanchez, 2007).

But I want to point out two important things. First, a scholar in the field can reach some interesting conclusions without social science; sociology is not always relevant. Second, we must destroy this silly idea that analytical erudition is opposed to highly intellectual synthesis; the analysis of texts must lead to general conclusions – even hypothetical ones. The opposition between a “modern approach to the social studies of science” and allegedly a “short-sighted and old-fashioned erudite approach” is a misleading picture invented by the doctrinarian scholars who want to make social science the only approach on magic, science etc. You can reach great ideas, great syntheses, great innovative conclusions concerning science, magic and other intellectual fields without having to resort to sociology and the social sciences! I repeat again: when you study something, you have to define the relevant context; this context is not necessarily and always “social”! That depends on the object studied.

Future of the field. Correspondence between Science and Magic

Zdenko: What are your most recent projects? What should be done tomorrow in the field of medieval magic? It seems to me, that nowadays many experienced scholars are reorienting from the field of [learned medieval] magic to somewhere else. Does this field still have a future?

Nicolas: There are two different questions here. As far as I am concerned, I will certainly write on magic sometimes, but my future research focuses on two topics: first, “scientific utopia” in the Middle Ages, i.e. the way that medieval philosophers or scientists planned invention or thought experiments outside the borders of what was actually possible according to their own *intellectual* and scientific framework; second, medieval commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics*, especially in the late Middle Ages (1350–1450).

Now, concerning future research which can be done in the field of magic, I will say that there are many studies to be done of course, notably concerning the editing and study of magical texts and the understanding of magical traditions. I mean, not only concerning the practical aspects, but also according to the intellectual or even philosophical framework of those who were reading these texts. Personally, I will certainly try to go further in my inquiry dealing with the relationship between scientific rationality and magic.

Zdenko: Relationship between the science and magic. It was also the question of one of the best-known scholars in this field, almost one hundred years ago, Lynn Thorndike [1882–1965]. But, what do we see now? How has the field changed and what questions should we now pose?

Nicolas: Thorndike remains *the* great authority. Sometimes, he has been despised because of his purely analytical approach, but the point is that his work is a great work. When you begin research on magic, and even on science, you always

look at his *History of Magic and Experimental Science*. As far as his guiding idea is concerned, he changed his mind between the two first volumes published in 1923, and volumes 3 and 4 published in 1934. His first idea was that medieval magic was the place where experimental science was born (Thorndike, 1905; Thorndike, 1923–1958). But he gradually changed his mind, and at the end of fourth volume he gave up this teleological idea, and he understood, that magical texts and thought about magic were interesting as testimonies of the culture of their time. And because this great work provides good analyses of many texts on magic and science, it remains the point of departure for all researchers.

The issue of the relationship between science and magic, or more precisely between scientific rationality and magic, has been the central issue of my research for years. We have to be very pragmatic on this question. Richard Kieckhefer wrote an important article on the *specific rationality* of magic (Kieckhefer, 1994). As far as I am concerned, I focused on the issue of the borders of scholastic science (natural philosophy, medicine) before “magical challenges,” I mean, I study how medieval scholars tried to keep their rationalistic framework when they had to deal with the claims of magicians.¹⁵ This means for me finally an understanding of the “specific rationality” of medieval science. This implies a very precise approach to the texts and to the thought, the analysis of the explicit or implicit debates.

Zdenko: Would you agree, that after all, at the end, it is always important to say: let the sources itself to be heard?

Nicolas: Yes, indeed.

Zdenko: Thank you very much for the interview and your time.

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¹⁵ See notably Nicolas Weill-Parot (2002b).

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