

## The Will to Project

### Cults, Hyperreality, and the Foundations of Religion

#### Religions vs. Cults

What is a cult?

Worshipping x  $\neq$  Holding x in high regard

To worship x = To regard x as supernatural

Worshipping x  $\rightarrow$  One's high regard for x not to answerable to data

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x is worshipped  $\rightarrow$  x is a fiction

x is worshipped  $\rightarrow$  x is a projection

Reality vs. Projection

Projection as Unconscious LARPing (live action role playing)

Projection=Virtualization

x is projected  $\rightarrow$  x is supernatural

x is supernatural  $\rightarrow$  x is projected

Divine a subset of supernatural

The cult-leader  $\neq$  somebody who is believed to be great

The cult-leader=somebody on whom people believe they can project a great fiction

#### Religions vs. Cults

What is a religion? A sanitized, rationalized cult; a cult that has become respectable; that has been absorbed into society; that has become part of the economy; that has the same financial and legal commitments as any other institution; that has been institutionalized and bureaucratized into near-lifelessness: in a word, a near dead cult. So it isn't cults that are degenerate religions; it is religions that are degenerate cults: degenerate precisely because they are so *non*-degenerate relative to all the usual rationality-based benchmarks and because, therefore, they are so lacking in the one thing—call it “spiritual vitality”, for lack of a less definite term—that sets religions apart from garden-variety institutions, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles.

## What is a cult?

So the real question is: What is a cult? The obvious answer is: A cult is a case of collective person-worship. The “collective” qualification is crucial. If Sally worships Charles Manson and nobody else does, that is not a cult. And if 100 different individuals worship Charles Manson, and they all do so independently of each other, that too is not a cult: that is essentially 100 different love-affairs; it is not a single institution and is therefore not a cult. But there *does* exist a cult if 100 individuals worship Charles Manson and they police each other to perpetuate the cycle of Manson-worship.

And this answer (“a cult is a case of collective person-worship”) is *extensionally* correct (or at least approximately so: see below), meaning that x is a cult if, and only if, x is a case of collective person-worship. But now we need answers to questions *about* this answer, and the first such question is: What is it to *worship* something?

## Worshipping x ≠ Holding x in high regard

To worship something is not merely to acknowledge that it has great power. A hypothetical: I believe that Charles Manson is extremely intelligent, extremely capable, etc. This does not believe that I *worship* him; it doesn’t even mean that I idolize him. Of course, if I know that he is so formidable, I will conduct myself accordingly; but being worshipful of a given thing is not the same thing as making due allowances for its strengths. To be sure, my being worshipful of Charles Manson would seem to entail my believing him to have some virtue or other (e.g. intelligence) to an extreme degree; but the entailment does not go in the opposite direction.

The situation doesn't change if I believe that Charles Manson is superhumanly intelligent, capable, etc. A hypothetical: I believe that Charles Manson is not just extremely intelligent but several orders of magnitude more intelligent than any other person. ("Intelligent" can serve as a stand-in for any other virtue we might wish to impute to him.) I still don't necessarily *worship* him. Another hypothetical: It turns out that Superman (or someone with his abilities) exists—that there exists someone who can fly, has x-ray vision, etc. I find out about this: and I do so through the normal methods; I see this Super-person in action, or I learn about his super deeds through reliable channels. Do I *worship* this entity? Not necessarily. If I am a normal human being, I am probably envious; if I am a rational human being, I am probably fearful, at least depending on what else I know about him.

## To worship x = To regard x as supernatural

Importantly, "superhuman" is not the same as "supernatural." My believing that Charles Manson is *supernaturally* intelligent (or strong or what not) would seem to entail my being worshipful of him—as opposed to merely duly cognizant of his strengths.

But there are a few points to make in response to this. First, "supernatural" is not the same as "extreme" or even "extremely extreme." Somebody who can run 30 mph is extremely fast. Somebody who can run 50 mph is superhumanly fast—but not supernaturally so. It doesn't make a difference how fast he can run: if he can run 500 mph, he is superhumanly fast, but not supernaturally so. But what if he can exceed the speed of light? If I knew that someone could exceed the speed of light, I wouldn't conclude that was supernaturally fast; I would conclude that, contrary to what I thought, the laws of nature don't prohibit things from exceeding the speed of light.

To be clear: If the data warrants my believing that some person (let's call him "Max") can exceed the speed of light, and for that reason and that reason alone I believe Max to be able to exceed the speed of light, then I don't believe that Max is supernaturally fast. "But suppose you hold your beliefs about the laws of nature fixed", it might be objected, "*and* you believe that Max can exceed the speed of light: in that case, surely, you *do* believe that Max is supernaturally fast." But that supposition is incoherent; for if I believe the data to warrant such a position, then I *ipso facto* believe it to warrant rejection of the position that nothing can exceed the speed of light.

## Worshipping x → One's high regard for x not to answerable to data

I cannot have *reasons*, not even bad ones, for judging someone to be supernaturally fast, or supernaturally intelligent, or supernaturally anything. I can have reasons for believing that someone is so intelligent that I must have previously been wrong about the laws of nature; I can even have reasons for believing that someone is so intelligent that, although I was otherwise right about the laws of nature, they break down in this one case. But as long as my beliefs represent data-models—or even beliefs about the limits of such models—I cannot believe that anything is supernaturally anything. This holds even if my attempts to model data lead me to hold that something has some attribute to such an extreme degree that, if only in that one context, there are no coherent data models to be had.

Relatedly, the difference between "supernatural" and "superhuman" is not one of degree. Smith believes that Charles Manson is superhumanly but not supernaturally intelligent; and Jones believes that Manson is in fact supernaturally intelligent. Jones doesn't necessarily attribute *more* intelligence to Manson than Smith does. It may even be that, as both Smith and Jones know, Smith attributes more intelligence to Manson than Jones does.

Worshipping x → One's high regard for x not answerable to data

The relevant difference lies not in what they believe but in why they believe it. Setting aside ratiocinative errors on Smith's part—setting aside issues relating to the fact that Smith is not an infallible ratiocinator and he therefore can make mistakes when it comes to modeling data—Smith believes that Manson is intelligent only as long as the data warrants it and only to the extent that the data warrants it: if new data shows that Manson is not intelligent, then, ratiocinative errors aside, Smith will stop believe that Manson is intelligent; and if the data suggests that Manson is intelligent in way X but not in way Y, then, same qualification, Smith will believe that Manson is intelligent in way X but not in way Y. For Jones, the situation is very different. Jones' views concerning Manson's intelligence are likely to have initially had a basis in the data; but Jones' views as to the scope and extent of Manson's intelligence are grossly out of proportion to what the data warrants, and Jones' belief in Manson's intelligence will be disproportionately slow to respond to new data shows that belief to be false. And these errors—if we wish to call them that—are not of the garden-variety ratiocinative variety; they cannot be chalked up to mistakes on Jones' part in modeling the relevant dataset; rather, they are to be chalked up to, as Jones sees it, the irrelevance of that dataset.

x is worshipped → x is a fiction

What this indicates is that Jones is not so much responding to Manson's intelligence as he is projecting it. To establish this, let us consider a clear-cut case of projection: a fictional character. Mr. Spock has certain characteristics: he's intelligent, quasi-telepathic, he has pointy ears, he is half and half-human, and so on. What *data* do we need to support our "belief", for lack of a better word, that Spock has these characteristics. None, obviously, since he is a posit, a construct---a projection. This does not mean that debates about Spock are necessarily misconceived. We can meaningfully debate whether he is as fluent in Vulcan as he is in English; about the extent to which being half-Vulan has shaped his character; and so on. We can have such debates since certain ways of resolving these debates will cohere better with our suppositions about him. But we cannot question our foundational suppositions concerning him, since those suppositions must be granted if there is to be a Spock for there to be questions about.

x is worshipped → x is a projection

Now let us change the story a bit. We tire of Star Trek and Mr. Spock; we tire of it because we are not a part of it; we are passive spectators. We want something interactive—something we can participate in. So we find somebody who is Mr. Spock-like to a reasonable degree of approximation—call this person "Max." Max is highly intelligent, and his intelligence seems to be configured in a Spock-like way. (His intelligence doesn't present in the form of prowess as a poet or interior decorator; it presents in the form of acumen in the areas of logic and engineering and other Spock-appropriate areas.) Also, Max's appearance is Spock-similar, and so is his general demeanor. Because he has these attributes, we can use him to "play Star Trek", as it were; we can "live action role play" (or "larp") in Star Trek World. (For this larp to work, we would also need a Kirk-proxy, a Bones-proxy, and so on. So let us assume that we have

such proxies and, therefore, that all of the assumptions about to be made about Max-Spock will be made *mutatis mutandis* about them.)

The more Spock-like Max is, the better, since the larp will be easier to pull off, as well as just better, the more Spock-like he is. And if Max ceases to be Spock-like, the larpers would have a choice: either (i) larp around that fact, i.e., find a way to work these lapses into the larp, or (ii) dump Max and replace him with another Spock or, finally, (iii) drop the larp. But if the lapse is severe enough, the frame simply won't hold, and it will be necessary to go with either (ii) or (iii).

## Reality vs. Projection

Let us develop the hypothetical a bit further. There is another person, call him "Dax", whom the larpers all know. But Dax is not part of the larp; for them, he is just a person; and so we will also assume, they don't have particularly strong feelings about him either way and are able to evaluate his behavior in a reasonably unbiased manner. If Dax says something moderately smart, he will be given credit for saying something moderately smart; if he says something extraordinarily brilliant, he may be given credit for it or, depending on the circumstances, there may be skepticism as to whether he came up with that point on his own; something "neutral", meaning that it doesn't indicate either intelligence or its absence, he will be evaluated accordingly, meaning that people will hold onto their previous estimation, if they had one, of Dax's intelligence; and so on.

But with Max-Spock the situation will be very different: evidence of his intelligence, or lack thereof, will be evaluated not on its own terms but with respect to Max's ability to function as a Spock-proxy. If he says something brilliant, it will be taken as strong confirmation of said ability. If he says something moderately intelligent, it may serve as weak confirmation or even as disconfirmation, since

Spock is not merely moderately intelligent. If he says something positively stupid, measures will be taken to compatibilize that fact with the larp; for example, it may be assumed that \*Spock\* is engaged a ploy of some kind or that he is under the influence of a drug of some kind. If he continues to be stupid, he will likely be fired from his job as Spock. There isn't necessarily any one viable way of interpreting a given statement or act on Max's part, but there is necessarily a difference between evaluating Max's conduct on its own terms, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, evaluating it with respect to his feasibility as a Spock-proxy. If X is a given act or statement on Max's part, the answer to "what does X tell us about Max?" will—as a matter of logic, and not, at least merely, of psychology--be different from the answer to "what does X tell us about Max's feasibility as a Spock-proxy?"

## Projection as Unconscious LARPing (live action role playing)

Question: Could we *unconsciously* assign the role of Spock to Max? In general, can we unconsciously assign people roles? We obviously can. In other words, we can unconsciously *project* roles onto people. In fact, "unconscious projection" is a pleonasm, since a projection is nothing other than an unconscious assignment of a role or significance to something. With this in mind, let's suppose you project Spock onto Max, i.e. that you unconsciously assign him this role. How will you experience Max-Spock? Not quite the same way you would experience him if you consciously assigned the role of Spock to him. When you consciously assign him this role, you do consciously know that Max is *not* in fact Spock, and the part of you that experiences Max as Spock is inhibited, though not extinguished. But when you unconsciously assign him this role, that part of you is not so inhibited, and you really do experience Spock through Max.



## Projection=Virtualization

You thus experience what is internal as external; you experience an idea as an objective reality. This apparition—for that is what it is—is necessarily experienced as “other worldly”, since it isn’t of the world that it inhabits. Let us make the reasoning here explicit. Suppose that you simply hallucinate Mr. Spock—hallucination being the purest form of projection. This hallucinated Spock could fly and walk on water; it would be impervious to fire; and so on. Of course, when you project a Spock onto a Max, this is not quite what is going on, since Max’s body is real and is subject to the usual physical and biological constraints. But Max-Spock would not be subject to the usual narrative constraints. When Max makes a pedestrian statement, Max-Spock may thereby be making a deeply insightful statement. When Max says, “it’s getting dark”, Max is just saying that it’s getting dark, but Max-Spock is saying that the sun is finally setting on the Federation. Max’s backstory is reality-based; so when Max makes a statement, what we can read into it is limited by what we know about Max. Max-Spock’s backstory is fantasy-based; so when Max-Spock makes a statement, we can read whatever we want into it, so long as we can find a way to make it consistent with that fantasy. What we read into such a statement mustn’t undermine the integrity of the fantasy, but we are otherwise free to read whatever we want into it.

## x is projected → x is supernatural

A projected being is *ipso facto* supernatural. A hallucinated Mr. Spock—in other words, a Mr. Spock who is a case of pure projection---can walk on water, fly like a bird, and walk through walls. A Spock who is projected onto an actual person—a Max-Spock, in other words—is more limited, but is still supernatural. It will never be a perceptual datum that he is walking on water; one won’t see/hallucinate

him walking on water. But if he does what appears to be walking on water, or he could even conceivably be construed as walking on water, that may suffice. There probably are optical conditions under which somebody who is walking on a wet street appears to be walking on water. Ordinarily, if we see such a person, we interpret the visual data appropriately; we know that the visual data, taken by itself, leaves it open whether that person is walking on water or walking on a hard but water-covered surface, and we disambiguate the data in light of what we know the real world to permit. But if the person we are seeing is Max-Spock, we can disambiguate the data the other way. Perceptual data is not infinitely ambiguous; so we are not likely to have visual data that could be interpreted as Max-Spock jumping over a nearby skyscraper; but we are likely to have visual data that could be interpreted as him doing something or other supernatural, be it walking on water (walking on a water-covered surface), telekinetically moving objects (opening a garage-door with a remote hidden in his pocket), or divining the future (making a vague comment about God's wrath right before a stock-market crash).

$x$  is supernatural  $\rightarrow$   $x$  is projected

If it's projected, it's supernatural, as we have just seen. And, to make a new point, if it's supernatural, it's projected. "Supernatural" doesn't just mean "not bound by natural law." It means something stronger; it means "such that it is not even to be understood in terms of natural law." According to some, there exist phenomena—so-called "singularities"—that represent breakdowns of natural law. Let us suppose, if only for argument's sake, that such phenomena exist. Even if such phenomena represent violations of natural law, they are nonetheless to be understood in terms of natural law: to understand such a phenomenon is to know that it is what comes about when such and such natural laws don't do what they usually do. To say of something that it is supernatural is to say that

it is not of this world—that it is *in* this world but not *of* it. Black holes are both in and of this world, and so are all other alleged singularities. To say of something that it is “of another world” is to say there is some other reality that is its true home and that understanding it involves understanding its role in that world. Speaking from a secular perspective, to say of something that it is of another world is to say that it is a fiction posing as a non-fiction—that its true home is a fictitious universe but that it is making an appearance, as it were, in reality. This is consistent with the fact that supposedly supernatural beings are always emotionally significant. Rogue particles are not “supernatural.” They are anomalous, yes. And conceivably, we might judge them to be inherently anomalous—inherently such that we cannot understand them. But even then, they wouldn’t be supernatural; they would merely represent violations of our *a priori* belief that natural phenomena can always be understood in terms of exceptionless laws. And if we did regard such particles as supernatural, it would only be because we saw them as manifestations of some other-worldly and therefore fictitious being.

In a word, a supernatural being is a projected being; and a projected being is a fiction that we are seeing in something real.

## Divine a subset of supernatural

One final preparatory point: “Divine” is a subcategory of “supernatural.” To be sure, not all supernatural beings are divine. For example, monsters may be supernatural—Michael Myers (from the *Halloween* movies) is supernatural but not divine. But all divine beings are supernatural. (If Jesus was a mere mortal, he was not divine.) “Supernatural” means “Divine by virtue of representing God”, or some such. Also, even debased supernatural beings, such as Michael Myers, are not so much *not* divine as they are anti-divine—divine in the way that representatives of Satan are divine. Exactly how being divine

differs from “merely” being supernatural is not our immediate concern. What matters now is that being divine is a way of being supernatural, suggesting that divine beings and supernatural beings are all ultimately cut from the same cloth.

## The cult-leader≠ somebody who is believed to be great

Let us map these points onto cult leaders. First of all, the cult leader is necessarily perceived as supernatural. If somebody is merely perceived as competent or virtuous, that is not sufficient for that person’s being a cult leader. Even someone whose talent is of Mozartian proportions is not for that reason alone able to be a cult leader. Had Mozart himself decided to create a cult, his “pitch”, so to speak, could not have been that he was so extraordinarily talented; it would have had to have been that he was supernatural in some way---with the qualification that he would likely have used his musical abilities to prove that he was supernatural. In general, if a cult leader has extremely abilities in some direction, as he often does, they can serve as *evidence* of his supernatural status and can in that way qualify him to be a cult-leader, but they so qualify him on their own terms.

## The cult-leader=somebody on whom people believe they can project a great fiction

If he is to be seen as supernatural, the cult leader must be the object of projection; and this means that his followers must see a fictitious character in him, i.e., his followers are not so much following him as they are following the fiction of which their projections have made him the

personification. The cult leaders do not need to project a supernatural being onto the cult leader, for the reason that he will be seen as supernatural so long as *any* fiction is projected onto him; and the reason for this, in its turn, is that any fiction that inhabits this world is other-worldly and therefore supernatural...