

Article

“Make What You Can of It If You Are a Philosopher”: An Essay on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Christian Spiritualism”

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Abstract: A number of years ago, renowned English biographer Andrew Lycett wrote a short piece about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that highlighted the seemingly irreconcilable tension between Doyle the creator of the “super-rational” detective Sherlock Holmes, and Doyle the passionate defender of “Christian Spiritualism”. In this essay, I aim to explore this alleged tension, ultimately arguing that these two Doyles need not be in tension—the only true tension being between the two terms in Doyle’s preferred philosophy, “Christian Spiritualism”.

Keywords: rationalism; spiritualism; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; Sherlock Holmes; Christian Spiritualism



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Whereas Sherlock Holmes is by all accounts “super-rational” (Lycett 2009),¹ “scientific . . . [and] passion[ate] for definite and exact knowledge” (Conan Doyle 1981a, p. 17), his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is often seen as nearly the opposite, due to his support for spiritualism, or the belief system that asserts, among other things, the reality of necromancy, or that the spirits of the dead can provide mediums with information about the afterlife. On the one hand, in the late 1920s, Doyle has Holmes say in no uncertain terms: “This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply” (Conan Doyle 1981c, p. 1034); on the other hand, and during the same time period, Doyle himself admits to having seen spirits firsthand, and declares himself “a firm believer in the truth of Spiritualism” (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 160). Many would agree with Doyle biographer Andrew Lycett and others² that this is a paradox of the highest order—of rationality and irrationality deeply polarized in one and the same man. Many people, however, would be wrong.

Although I am mindful of the looming “personal heresy” (that is, seeing a work of art as nothing but the reflection of the artist’s own personal beliefs) (Lewis and Tillyard 1965, p. 5), I do think that if one takes the time to understand Doyle’s approach to, and reasons for his belief in, necromancy and spiritualism, one can see his creation, Holmes, in a new light; indeed, it is significant that Doyle was always willing to give *reasons* for why he supported spiritualism, and even challenged his readers, saying “Make what you can of it if you are a philosopher” (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 154).

In this essay, I will argue that Doyle’s justification for believing in spiritualism was more robust than many would imagine, and that the major tension within Doyle is not so much between being a spiritualist and being the creator of Holmes, but rather between the two incongruous terms in his favored philosophy, “Christian Spiritualism” (Price 2010), since the Christian tradition clearly warns “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spirits, for you will be defiled by them” (Leviticus 19:31).

1. Knowledge of Evil as a Good Thing

Doyle was raised a Catholic Christian, and though he later came to reject many of the church’s teachings—including its prohibition against necromancy—he never ceased associating himself with some form of rational Christianity. Given this, I believe that Doyle’s approach to spiritualism is best seen against such a backdrop.

Informed by Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, a rational form of Christianity typically asserts that humans should want to know things for their own sake. In the first few chapters of Genesis, we are told that God, who is the perfection of all things—including knowledge, logic, morality, and so on—made human beings. Why did He do this? Being the perfection of love, God wanted to expand the scope and depth of His love, which is to say, among other things, that He wanted to enter into more friendships. However, a rational being such as God cannot have friendship or achieve the highest forms of love with non-rational creatures; the only type of love achievable between a rational and a non-rational creature is what the Greeks call *storge* or we, in English, call affection, or the sense of being comfortable with someone or something (for instance, Holmes’s affection for his pipe, or his dog’s affection for Holmes’s slippers). Since God wanted real friendship with His creation, He had to make part of His creation—at the very least, the human part—rational. Rationality, here, does not refer simply to the ability to reason, but rather to the rational soul, spirit, or person—“the image of God”. Within the rational soul or spirit are different faculties, including the rational faculty (intuition, logic, and so on), free will (the ability for the individual to act as its own first cause), and the higher affections or desires.

In particular, it is worth noting that because God desired to make human beings—so this narrative goes—a human being, as the image of God, also has desires, chief among which is a desire for God. That being said, this desire for God is not always—indeed, is rarely—for God qua God (that is, the totality of all that God is), but is often a desire for some aspect of God, such as for God qua justice or, more to the point, God qua knowledge or truth. Since God is understood in this tradition to be omniscience (the totality of all knowledge) and truth, we can say that God has made humans with a desire for truth or with a desire to want to know things—primarily, though not only, for their own sakes. For instance, humans should want to know whether there is something called “ectoplasm”, firstly because to know the answer to this is good in itself, and only secondly because this knowledge might be used for some other end. God is called the perfection of all knowledge, and part of what makes Him perfect in this respect is that He knows about all of the horrible things in the world. If God is our model then, all things being equal, knowing about evil is, in itself, a good thing.

Because humans are made in the image of God, humans have a desire (insofar as they are functioning properly) to know things for their own sake. From the perspective of being a creature designed to seek out knowledge, then, it would seem perfectly proper for a human being to ask, and to explore, whether it is possible for the dead to communicate with the living, for instance. Because God is *Logos*, or the perfection of logic, a human, when functioning properly, delights in logical thinking and, though their ability to reason is limited (that is, there are mysterious that the human mind cannot grasp in its current state), humans—as the image of God—always seek to stretch their thoughts.

2. A Science of Religion

Raised, and always identifying in *some way* as, a Christian, Doyle certainly seems to have been interested in knowledge, including knowing things for their own sake. Thus, we have the sheer fact that he dedicated such a tremendous amount of time to gathering evidence for necromancy and spiritualism—evidence that was eventually published in his two volumes on *The History of Spiritualism*—all before it became a matter of practical importance for him. In *The History of Spiritualism* we have many statements that suggest that Doyle was primarily interested in the questions surrounding spiritualism for their own sake. Hence, he speaks about “the *truth* of this new philosophy [i.e., Spiritualism]” (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 78, emphasis mine); he admits that he was “at first disposed to doubt the genuineness of the phenomena”, but later was moved to consent because of “convincing evidence” (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 160); he quotes approvingly the scientist Sir W. M. Crookes’s reasons for becoming interested in spiritualism: “For my own part, I too much value the pursuit of truth, and the discovery of any new fact in Nature, to

avoid inquiry because it appears to clash with prevailing opinions" (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 232), and has no trouble admitting that many who claim to be mediums are frauds, and that all spiritualist claims must be examined honestly and with a "sober" and "sane" mind (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, pp. 120–21).

However, although Doyle did, in general, appear to love truth for its own sake, he is probably best seen primarily as a lover of truth for practical ends. This is *not* pragmatism with respect to knowledge, which is skeptical of truth itself, but rather is an acknowledgement that there is truth, that it is valuable for its own sake, *and* that it is also valuable insofar as it can make the world a better place. Thus, after refuting his critics, who accused him of simple emotional reasons for endorsing necromancy and spiritualism (the death of his son), Doyle emphasized a practical-because-he-believed-it-true approach to spiritualism, saying:

If for a moment the author may strike a personal note he would say that, while his own loss had no effect upon his views, the sight of a world which was distraught with sorrow, and which was eagerly asking for help and knowledge, did certainly affect his mind and cause him to understand that these psychic studies, which he had so long pursued, were of *immense practical importance* and could no longer be regarded as a mere intellectual hobby or fascinating pursuit of novel research. (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 2, p. 227, emphasis mine)

Because Doyle thought spiritualism was largely true, and that this truth—above all—had practical results, many critics of Doyle have been tempted, as we saw in the introduction, to dismiss him with a single stroke of the ad hominem brush. Although I myself think that Doyle gets some of the facts wrong and makes some errors in his reasoning, he was far from an irrational, blind believer. His love of logic, which he inherited from his Christian upbringing, is felt on many occasions, and is best seen in how he refutes three typical fallacies leveled against his spiritualist beliefs.

The first fallacy Doyle deals with is the genetic fallacy, which sees his critics attacking his psychology or psychological state rather than dealing with the facts of the matter. These critics, as I mentioned before, usually dismiss Doyle's interest in necromancy or spiritualism *simply* or *only* as a result of his son's death and the subsequent "trauma" that resulted, but Doyle soundly deals with these critics, saying:

It has been said, too, by these unscrupulous opponents that the author's advocacy of the subject . . . was due to the fact that [he] had a son killed in the war, the inference being that grief had lessened [his] critical faculty and made [him] believe what in more normal times [he] would not have believed. The author has many times refuted this clumsy lie, and pointed out the fact that his investigation dates back as far as 1886. (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 2, p. 225)

The second fallacy that Doyle deals with is the special case fallacy, which falsely argues that because something is true in a special case, it is simply true. Doyle's example is to point out the logical errors of critics who completely dismiss necromancy because one particular medium is shown to be fraud. Although it is true that fraud weakens the credibility of spiritualism, and certainly of the individual medium who practices the fraud, it hardly warrants dismissing the entire belief system as *certainly* false in its *entirety*. Doyle remarks "We must not argue that because a man once forges, therefore he has never signed an honest cheque in his life" (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 305).

The third fallacy Doyle spends a great deal of time refuting is that of begging the question, which is typically accompanied by the fallacy of selective evidence. Begging the question has to do with assuming the truth of that which you want to prove, and then proceeding to "prove" it, while selective evidence, as its complement, has to do with ignoring evidence that does not support one's case. According to Doyle, the worst offenders in these respects were the materialist scientists of his day. Doyle insists from the start that his interest in spiritualism is motivated by the love of truth, especially truth that produces practical results; his approach is that everything that can be should "be checked by *reason*"

(Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, pp. 34–35, emphasis mine), and his goal is to help establish spiritualism as a kind of “science of religion” (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 2, p. 248). Since there was, and still is, no evidence that *disproves* a spiritual dimension, Doyle—like a Victorian Fox Mulder—was perfectly in keeping with his intellectual rights to pursue questions about the apparent spiritual dimension of reality (even if he was not always justified in some of the claims he made for it). Materialist scientists and radical empiricists, who dismiss all questions about spiritual matters from the get-go, illogically limit the scope of their investigations since there was, and still is, no compelling or conclusive evidence against such a realm: “Speaking generally, it may be said that the attitude of organised science during these years was as unreasonable and unscientific as that of Galileo’s cardinals, and that if there had been a Scientific Inquisition, it would have brought its terrors to bear upon the new knowledge” (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 1, p. 182).

Doyle, of course, is not always above logical reproach. He uses hyperbole on more than one occasion, such as when he says of a particular case having to do with spirits pressing themselves into molds that it is “inconceivable that any normally endowed man” could “doubt” it (Conan Doyle 2007, vol. 2, p. 170), and he often commits the black and white fallacy when he implies that readers must accept *either* his interpretation of the facts *or* the materialists’ interpretation of the facts. And, of course, we ourselves might seriously doubt the truth of spiritualism. Nevertheless, if Doyle says that he saw a ghost, he may well have—he just may not convince many of us that he did so since, for many of us, it would seem more reasonable to trust our own experiences on these things than to trust the testimony of another. Nevertheless, Doyle could very well be rationally justified in believing in certain aspects of spiritualism.

3. The Socratic Detective

However, how does this square with Holmes? Would not—should not—Doyle qua Holmes be more skeptical of even his own experiences? When we first encounter Sherlock Holmes, he is seen as “eccentric”; as a man who “has amassed a lot of out-of-the-way knowledge”, and who is, for many, “too scientific . . . [approaching] cold-bloodness” (Conan Doyle 1981a, p. 16). Although he might appear to be the very description of a philosopher, Holmes’s “ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of . . . philosophy . . . he appeared to know next to nothing” (Conan Doyle 1981a, p. 21). The reason for this, we are told, is because Holmes emphasizes the practical: he is of the opinion that the brain is akin to an empty attic into which one can only put so much furniture before it becomes too crowded. “Holmes’s smallest actions were all directed towards some definite and practical end” (Conan Doyle 1981a, p. 31), we are told, and “as a practical man of affairs it is acknowledged that [he] stand[s] alone” (Conan Doyle 1981d, p. 673).

For many, including Lycett, this is a clear indication that Holmes is a materialist pragmatist—a man who, because materialism has eliminated the concept of unchanging truth, only cares about immediate, pragmatic results. *This* Holmes, of course, would be very much out of step with Doyle and his largely Christian understanding of rationality. However, this understanding of Holmes is mistaken.

For one thing, although it is true that Holmes, like his creator, emphasizes results, the detective, again like his creator, is also able to value a thing for its own sake. For instance, he is able to appreciate music simply for what it is (he calls the concert he attends in one adventure “magnificent”), and even made a point to remember for no practical or pragmatic end, but simply for its own sake, Darwin’s theory of music predating speech (Conan Doyle 1981a, p. 37).

Moreover, Holmes makes it clear on more than one occasion that he is concerned not with results simply speaking (as per the pragmatist who does not care about questions of truth or falsity *per se*), but is concerned about results insofar as they are *true*. Hence, his “business [is] to *know* what other people don’t know” (Conan Doyle 1981b, p. 255, where knowledge is grounded in truth), and he works for “love of his art rather than for the acquirement of wealth”, where his art “is an impersonal thing—a thing beyond

[the] self" (Conan Doyle 1981b, pp. 257, 317), which suggests the Christian understanding of rationality, which has a human desiring something beyond the self—namely, truth. Consequently, Holmes could easily be seen as agreeing with Doyle that truth is valuable both for its own sake and for practical (not merely pragmatic) ends.

Furthermore, since acknowledgement of, and love for, truth implies, of course, the *existence* of truth, it should be clear that *if* Holmes is a metaphysical materialist (as Lycett seems to imply), then he is logically inconsistent, for by maintaining the existence of truth—unchanging, objective truth—he is asserting the existence of something that *is not* material but, rather, is immaterial or spiritual. Two more things can also be added in order to make it clear that Holmes should not willy-nilly be seen as materialist and, indeed, should—like his creator—be seen as open, for logical reasons, to the immaterial or spiritual realm.

First of all, nowhere, as it is sometimes implied, does Holmes *deny* that there is a spiritual realm. It is true that in a few of his cases—such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire", and, of course, the latest Hollywood movies—Holmes refutes unusual explanations (such as ghost hounds, vampires, or magic) that are forwarded to explain certain mysterious phenomena. However, what is vital to see is that even though, for instance, the hound of the Baskervilles is shown to be a fraud, it hardly follows that Holmes believed that ghost hounds were logical impossibilities.

In order for them to be logical impossibilities, the spiritual realm would either have to be shown not to exist or it would have to be understood in its entirety such that one could know that there were no ghost hounds in it. Holmes does not assert either of these positions: all he does say is that he has very modestly confined his "investigations to this world" (Conan Doyle 1981d, p. 681)—and so he cannot be seen challenging the logical possibility of ghost hounds. What we do see Holmes doing is what every rational man would do: first, reasoning that a ghost hound being the cause of a series of deaths is highly improbable given what we know about the normal workings of the world around us; second, recognizing that since such is improbable, it is more rational to consider some other explanation for these deaths—namely, human volition; and yet third, still leaving open the *logical possibility* of an atypical—in this case, spiritual—cause:

There are two questions waiting for us at the outset: the first is whether any crime has been committed at all; the second is what is the crime, and how was it committed? Of course, if Dr. Mortimer's surmise should be correct, and we are dealing with forces outside the ordinary laws of nature, then there is an end to our investigation, but we are bound to exhaust all other hypotheses before falling back upon this one. (Conan Doyle 1981d, p. 684)

Second of all, even though Holmes may not have thought spiritual knowledge (including, if we like, knowledge attained through necromancy) valuable for his immediate cases, it hardly follows that he thought such knowledge would be worthless for all cases; there may be cases in the future, for instance, where such knowledge would be valuable. Holmes, we must remember, is supremely logical, which means that he only asserts what he knows with certainty (" $1 + 1 = 2$ "), probability ("I have a mother and father"), or possibility ("I ate pizza for lunch two months ago"), and he only absolutely denies what he knows with certainty not to be the case (" $1 + 1 \neq 3$ "). Those who see Holmes as a materialist, therefore, need to pay closer attention to his *modus operandi*, which is logical and balanced.

4. I Will Set My Face against the Person Who . . .

So if, as I have argued, Doyle largely maintained a Christian understanding of rationality—valuing truth both for its own sake and for practical results—and if this is also Holmes's understanding of these, then how do we deal with the apparent suggestion, mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, of a radical divide between the irrational, spiritualist Doyle on the one hand, and the rational, materialist Holmes—the Holmes who says, "No ghosts need apply"—on the other? This, I suggest, should be seen as an instance of Lycett and those similar to him arguing fallaciously, for when Holmes appears to deny ghosts, he is in fact neither denying ghosts (there is nothing in the sentence

that suggests that ghosts do not exist) nor is Holmes's point even about ghosts in this context, but rather is a general comment about the supernatural in general, and vampires in particular. Thus, we may assert with both Doyle and Holmes that ghosts—or any spiritual being, thing, or state of affairs for that matter—*may* apply, provided that their existence and presence is logically warranted—for instance, if they are directly seen by the man himself.

Nevertheless, while the existence of non-human spirits may be rationally believed, and while knowledge of them—even the most horrible spirits—is good in and of itself (or else God would not be omniscience), we still must ask whether our God-given desire for knowledge should be *absolutely pursued* or *generally pursued*. This is to ask whether we should seek out knowledge in a qualified or unqualified manner.

According to a more traditional Christianity, to which Doyle does not subscribe, it is quite clear that the pursuit of knowledge is a qualified or general good; some knowledge should not be pursued, or at least not *at this time* or *in this manner*. For instance, I would not let my preteen son read Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ*, but when he is older and, more importantly, more discerning, then I would allow it and, indeed, would encourage it, since it is good to know about a thing for its own sake.

Something similar may be said about spiritualism. According to traditional Christianity, some forms of necromancy are authentic, and can possibly confer knowledge of the spirit realm. In 1 Samuel 28, the Witch of Endor used necromancy to raise the spirit of Samuel and the knowledge that the spirit communicated to Saul was in fact knowledge (1 Samuel 28:3–24). God, so the tradition has argued, allowed the witch to raise the spirit, but insofar as necromancy is an abomination to God, humans must maintain that He did not desire the witch to do this. Somehow—probably through a pact with a fallen angel or demon—she was able to do so, and God, respecting our free will, allowed her and the demon to do this. But the *how* is not as important as the *that*: necromancy—and magic in general (hence, the sorcerers battling Moses in Egypt)—may well be real and can give us knowledge, but traditional Christianity also makes it clear that while knowledge is good in and of itself, attaining any knowledge through necromancy is bad: “I will set My face”, says God, “against the person who turns to mediums and spirits to prostitute himself by following them” (Leviticus 20:6). The real tension, then, within Doyle is not between his spiritualist beliefs and his greatest literary creation, but between the two terms in his own philosophy, “Christian Spiritualism”.

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Notes

¹ Also see Andrew Lycett (2007), *The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes: The Life and Times of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*.

² Although my intension in this essay isn't to unpack all the voices who have noted, in varying degrees the tension between Doyle's Holmes and Doyle's Spiritualist beliefs, there are many voices who could be added to this choir. Martin Booth, in *The Doctor and the Detective*, discusses Doyle's interaction with various spiritual themes that don't easily jive with Holmes in the last few chapters of his book. See Martin Booth (2000), *The Doctor and the Detective: A Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*. Douglas Kerr (2013), in *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*, is especially good on this theme in chapter seven, where he spends considerable time discussing the whole plane of the supernatural—not just ghosts but also fairies as well—further adding to some of the felt juxtaposition with the hyper-rational Holmes. See Douglas Kerr (2013, pp. 201–54). And while Stefen Bechtel and Laurence Roy Stains, in their excellent *Through a Glass Darkly: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Quest to Solve the Greatest Mystery of All*, do note this tension, they nuance it a bit more than other biographers (Bechtel and Stains 2017). See especially chapters four and five, where the creation of Sherlock Holmes is discussed in light of the science of the unseen.

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