

Roussou, Eugenia. 2015. 'Believing in the Supernatural through the "evil eye": Perception and Science in the modern Greek Cosmos.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (3): 425-438.

The term 'supernatural' has been theoretically defined as "an order of existence beyond what is pragmatically visible and observable, that is paranormal in the sense that it supposedly defies the laws of nature" (Anderson 125). It gained its significance during the Enlightenment, when emphasis was given to the distinction between the natural world and the realm of spirits (Bosco 143). Saler (31-53) maintained that the supernatural holds both risk and potential for cross-cultural applicability. Its usage has been criticized, and this criticism stems from the fact that the supernatural is supposed to be "a rather old word carrying many meanings and much cultural baggage" (Lohmann 117). Even if the term is an old word, however, it still possesses the power to assist analytically and conceptually in understanding the more "mystical, extraordinary, and ordinary, ubiquitous spiritual world" (Lohmann 117).

Using the "supernatural" as a central theoretical and analytical concept, I aim to present an ethnographic paradigm from southern Europe where the boundaries between belief, perception and science are blurred, and where "naturalism" and "supernaturalism" are not conceived as necessarily antithetical. The empirical data analyzed here come from extensive anthropological fieldwork in Rethymno, a town on the island of Crete, and in Thessaloniki, the second largest city of Greece, which focused mainly on the popular practice of the evil eye¹. What follows is an anthropological account of how people in Greece understand, perceive and negotiate the notion of the "supernatural" through an every socio-cultural phenomenon, that of the evil eye. After shedding some light on the relationship between the evil eye and

¹ My field research was primarily conducted between August 2005 and November 2006, for the needs of my PhD thesis. Subsequent visits to Greece have made certain that my ethnography and analysis are up to date. The majority of my informants come from a middle-class socio-economic background; they are mainly educated, with a variety of professional activities and an age range between mid-twenties and early seventies.

the supernatural in the Greek context, I will analyze the multifaceted interaction between perception, science, and the supernatural. I will conclude by bringing the notion of belief into the discussion, in an attempt to demonstrate how this notion can contribute to the better understanding of why the spheres of the scientific and the supernatural need no longer be approached as antithetical.

The Evil Eye and the Supernatural

The evil eye refers to the phenomenon where everyday social communication, especially gazing and gossiping, in particular, and the exchange of negative energy, in general, can affect people's health and well-being, leading to bodily symptoms of illness. People in Greece regard the evil eye as a mild form of spirit possession (Roussou 138-43), and a healing ritual needs to be performed in order to remove this embodied and at the same time spiritual possession away from people's bodies. The ritual against the evil eye is predominantly Christian-oriented, performed usually by lay healers who invoke religious figures (Jesus, the Virgin Mary, various saints of the Orthodox Christian Church) to ensure its efficacy².

As far as the social implications of the phenomenon are concerned, members of kin, affines and friends are more often than not responsible for transmitting the evil eye; the more intimate people are with one another, the more penetrative their gaze and the transmission of negative emotions, such as jealousy, grows to be. As Elena, a Thessalonikan woman, explains, the evil eye attacks individuals who are vulnerable, sociable and distinctive; those who hold a very good working position, are intelligent, talented, rich and/or beautiful. And this is because their uniqueness escapes the social

² Although the evil eye exists as a concept in the context of the official religion of Greece, Orthodox Christianity, the Orthodox Church denounces the lay interpretation of it. In particular, the Church believes that the ritual against the evil eye should only be performed by priests, and not by lay healers. In reality, however, even priests ask the help of lay healers, who use plenty of religious symbolisms and Christian prayers during the ritual, in order to have the evil eye removed from people's selves.

norms, attracting gazes, gossip, and envy. It became apparent in the majority of my Rethymniot and Thessalonikan field discussions that one must have some kind of special feature incorporated in his identity in order to be given the evil eye. If this is the case, the evil eye acts as a tool of social classification, categorizing people according to how special and worthy they are individually and socially. Getting the evil eye means that one has established a social status above the average, beyond the ordinary, and hence one is worth being admired.

In this daily context of social interactions, a spiritual field of inter-communicating energies triggers as well as wards off the evil eye. These energies, whether human-oriented (negative energy transmitted by a specific person) or spirit-oriented (the devil makes people transmit the evil eye; Jesus, the Virgin and/or a saint are invoked to ward off the evil eye), are thought to belong to the sphere of the “supernatural”. Rethymniots and Thessalonikans do place the evil eye in the realm of what have been characterized as “supernatural phenomena”, since they believe it involves powers – whether these are called energy, spiritual forces, and/or religious figures – that are part of a cosmos beyond nature. At the same time, however, they consider it as belonging to their everyday “natural” way of living. They treat it as “a real phenomenon with physical causes and effects, which people model differently from one culture to next. All people can distinguish supernaturalistic ideas from naturalistic ones, though they may not find the distinction salient” (Lohmann 176).

In creating links between “supernaturalistic” and “naturalistic”³ ideas, my informants follow two explanatory paths. On the one hand, there are the individuals who have invoked the supernatural in order to support the evil eye, or at least to claim an intimacy between the two. These are mostly young and educated Rethymniot men

³ While maintaining the emphasis of the concepts, in the rest of the article I will use the terms “supernatural”, “natural” and their derivatives without quotations marks.

and women, with a relatively good relationship with the Church, who are open to other alternative spiritual practices, and who focus their discussion on perception; that is, on how the evil eye can actually be sensed supernaturally. On the other hand, there are the people, both young and middle-aged, religious adherents and non-believers, both in Rethymno and Thessaloniki, who talk about the supernatural in relation to science, and use science in their discourse so as to legitimize the supernaturalism of the evil eye practice. Before I proceed to analyze further these two aspects of the supernatural in relation to the evil eye, a clarification needs to be made.

My intention in this article is not to place the evil eye in the field of the supernatural a priori. Yet, my ethnographic data have shown that the evil eye in Greece is linked with the supernatural. The people I have spoken to in Rethymno and Thessaloniki, directly or more implicitly, have always mentioned the supernatural in our discussions, for the supernatural constitutes, just like the evil eye, a part of their everyday life. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, I must explicitly state at this early point that this is a paper about the supernatural, not the evil eye. My aim is to provide an ethnographic account of how the supernatural is perceived in Greece, through the discourse of an everyday popular practice; namely, the focus of the analysis here is the supernatural through the evil eye, not the other way around.

Perception and the Supernatural

While I was interviewing Despina, a Rethymniot woman, at her place of work, Yiannis, one of her colleagues, came to join in. They both associated the evil eye with the supernatural, stating that there is a strong relationship between the two. The evil eye, according to them, belongs to the supernatural because it is a power that we cannot thoroughly comprehend. We can only speculate where it comes from. It does not have a natural cause of existence. It is related to the occult. Yiannis specified that

he regards the evil eye as very similar to certain peculiar supernatural incidents he had recently experienced. Firstly, he predicted that his sister was going to give birth on her birthday, and that the child was going to be a girl. Yiannis' prediction became a fact. The second incident had to do with his dead grandfather. Yiannis' cousin dreamed of their grandfather, who was persistently asking to have his glasses placed with him in the coffin, specifying that they had been dropped near a particular bush during his funeral. The day after the dream, Yiannis and his cousin went back to the cemetery to search for their grandfather's glasses. They found them lying in the exact spot indicated in the dream, and they placed them in their grandfather's grave, accomplishing his wish.

At this point, Despina immediately took over the narrative, agreeing with her colleague that the evil eye is supernatural and has to do with "mysterious and mystic powers that affect us". She went on to narrate an incident that happened during another funeral, that of her father-in-law. After the funeral, Despina explained to us, the close family of the deceased returned to his home. Since it was a warm day, they opened the window to let some air in. Suddenly, a large butterfly came through. It was large, just like her father-in-law was. It fluttered around and sat on his favourite sofa and on all the places he used to sit. It stayed in the house for the whole day until it died, later in that evening. Despina's daughter was saddened by the butterfly's death, but she was told that she should not be feeling badly; this butterfly was her grandfather's spirit, which came for a last visit to say goodbye to her and to everyone else in the family, and both the butterfly and her grandfather were now going to be looking after them from heaven.

As in the Greek cases narrated above, many people in contemporary Iceland accept the naturalism of the spirits of the dead since they have had perceived contact

with them (Anderson 127). A new spiritism, under the name of New Theology, has become popular in Iceland. It has influenced “a generation of young Lutheran ministers who saw spiritism as a way to salvage the wonder of the scripture” (Anderson 127). As Anderson maintains, Icelanders believe that spiritist experiences “provide direct ‘scientific’ evidence that people survive death, and that selected biblical miracles were not miracles at all, but real and true events” (127). Perceiving spirits of the dead is for many contemporary Icelanders proof that these spirits exist in a natural, physical sense. Anderson (127) continues to explain that:

Spirit claims and predictions could be verified in our time because it is sometimes possible to check what is said by a spirit, as when speaking through a medium, against what can be discovered to be factual. If a spirit passes on verifiable information that only the spirit could have known—the location of a hidden object, for example—then the medium is not a fraud, and the spirit must be part of the natural world. Or so it is thought.

In the case of Yiannis, narrated above, there was no medium mediating between the spirit of the dead and my informant. Yet, as in the Icelandic spirit claims, the communication between Yiannis and his deceased grandfather was (thought to be) natural. The pair of glasses and the place where it was found by Yiannis were factual. The experience of Despina and her relatives was similar. The spirit of her deceased father-in-law took a natural form and was perceived physically. Contemporary Icelanders believe that direct communication with spirits of the dead is possible and can be verified by scientific experiments. According to Anderson: “For these Icelanders, their belief has its foundations in science or naturalism, not in religion or supernaturalism” (127). Like Yiannis and Despina, a large number of Rethymniots and Thessalonikans have placed the evil eye in the realm of the supernatural,

considering it a phenomenon that lies “above nature”. At the same time, they believe that the evil eye is just as much a natural phenomenon, which involves physical perception, as a supernatural one, which involves spiritual powers. Both Anderson’s Icelandic and my Greek informants adopt a different perspective on the supernatural. They demonstrate a shift with regard to what is understood as natural and what as supernatural. They draw a different boundary line between nature and the supernatural. What many people would call supernatural they call natural, since they perceive their supernatural experiences and the spirits of the dead as physical phenomena and real entities.

The human body senses the evil eye both during its transmission and its ritual removal. Spiritual powers participate in the practice; powers that escape the natural world, and are hence dismissed by scientists, but which can also be perceived as part of the natural everyday life. While I was having a discussion with two women in Rethymno, they too associated the evil eye with the supernatural. We got on to talking about life after death, about beliefs on reincarnation, the existence of other worlds and universes, the soul that can live after death. Then, one of the women said: “If you want to see such things, come to my house.” She went on to explain that she can hear footsteps and various sounds every night. And since she lives alone, in a village house just outside Rethymno, there is not really a chance someone else could be making those noises. Her house walls are not attached to the neighbours’ ones. But even if they were, they are old, thick, solid and absolutely soundproof, Persa explained. The footsteps sound could not be justified as coming from somewhere else outside her house.

“Through our bodies we see, feel, hear, perceive, touch, smell, and we hold our everyday worlds” (McGuire 285). Perception, given the involvement of sensory

organs, is attained through embodied attendance. My informants have perceived the spiritual through sensory experience. Despina has seen her father-in-law's soul. Persa has been hearing footsteps she has attributed to a dead relative, or to another invisible supernatural force. Yiannis and his cousin have acted as a bridge between the spirit of their grandfather and the living world. All of my informants have characterized their experiences with spirits of the dead as supernatural. At the same time, they have insisted upon the physicality and rationality of their perception. And they have claimed that the evil eye practice works in the same way: spiritual energies correspond with the body, and people become possessed by the evil eye and are subsequently healed.

“For the objective scientist, phenomena that fall outside the limits of rational and objective sensory perception are dismissed as non-existent” (Petrus 3). The evil eye is sensed by the sensory organs. It is physically experienced. And it is perceived through spiritual communication. Besides, *empeiria*, the Greek term for experience, denotes a human act that is not restrained within the sensory field, but extends beyond physical reality and touches the supernatural. Additionally, empiricism is subjective; and so is perception. The evil eye encounters and is confronted by a perceptual multiplicity of dynamic empiricisms, which are to be found in both the physical and the supernatural spaces of belonging.

Let's take mobile phones as an example. They transmit radiation that we cannot see since this is happening at another level that we cannot perceive. Imagine bright radiance being transmitted here and there. Something like that happens with the evil eye. Beams of negative energy are exchanged. In essence, there are zones of energy – whether these zones are called energy or supernatural powers – which we cannot perceive, but that does not mean they do not exist.

Manos paints a vivid representation of how the evil eye not only escapes visualism, but can also be perceived supernaturally. He indicates how sensory perception is both a physical and cultural act (Herzfeld 240). Like Manos, a large number of Rethymniots and Thessalonikans assert that the evil eye is an invisible, tasteless, non-olfactory, untouchable, inaudible power. At the same time, they narrate experiences where they perceive this power through their social and physical body. But perception, in the evil eye case, does not stop and is not constrained by the five-sense “scientific” schema. On the contrary, it is dynamic. It travels around the body, the sensory organs, but also around feelings, cultural sensoriums that transcend biological representations, spiritual battles and supernatural powers. The evil eye moves around and beyond the presumptions of positive science, but within Greeks’ everyday practised and spiritual life.

Science and Rationality

Whether they use science as a social authority to legitimize the evil eye practice or not, there has been a general agreement among all my informants with regard to the sort of science they have in mind. Physics, mathematics, experiments, calculations; this is what the term science denotes to them. In a discussion we had, for instance, with a young man in Rethymno, he referred to his father who is a physicist. They had an extended conversation about the supernatural in general and, as he told me, they placed the evil eye in the realm of the supernatural. The only explanation his father and Fotis could come up with in regard to the evil eye had to do with chaos theory. The evil eye, namely, is a form of energy in the universe, which is created, transmitted and then lost. It resembles the black holes that exist in the universe, where, through them, energy is created, absorbed, lost, and then recreated.

When people in Rethymno and Thessaloniki invite science in their articulation

of the evil eye, they adopt a “western conception of science” (Petrus 2), which they equate to positive science and consider it “a quintessence of rationality” (Tambiah 140). Furthermore, my informants embrace science as part of their evil eye discourses in the analogous multi-dynamic manner they cope with the supernatural. In particular, as will be described below, they introduce science to their interpretations of the evil eye in four different ways. Firstly, they dismiss the evil eye in the name of science, arguing that, since there is no scientific proof with regard to its existence, it is just a belief that lacks natural actuality. Secondly, they partly express scepticism, and say that they are open to believing in the evil eye should scientific proof be found in the future. Thirdly, they use science to legitimize the belief. And, lastly, they approve of the evil eye while ignoring any epistemological attempts at verification or rejection.

There is a small number of people in Rethymno and Thessaloniki, both young and middle-aged, mainly university students and professionals with a higher education degree, whose relationship to Orthodoxy is almost non-existent, who place the evil eye in the category of the supernatural. For them, the supernatural does not obey physical laws nor answer to a stereotypically scientific rationality, and no scientific experiments can be applied to it. Consequently, their negation of the evil eye is based on their assumption that science is the most accurate producer of knowledge and of rational claims. They think that since the evil eye is not proven by science, it is not rational, it is not real, and hence there is no reason why they should believe in it and let it become part of their everyday way of living. They all share a common idea of what they comprehend as scientific and epistemologically correct. Positive science is for them the ultimate producer of knowledge, and they trust its discourse completely.

According to Lett, an anthropologist who has extensively debated over how

science is predominantly conceived, represented, and epistemologically constructed, the scientific quest for knowledge depends on two forms of claims, the propositional and the emotive. The distinction between them, through the criteria of falsifiability, public verifiability and objectivity, determines what a factual scientific principal of knowledge is. Propositional statements, that consist of two varieties, the analytic and the synthetic, “make assertions that are either true or false depending on the evidence”; on the other hand, emotive statements ‘communicate the speaker’s feelings and nothing else’ (Lett 25). One can distinguish between the two: if a given statement can be abandoned by its author, due to conceivable evidence appearing in the scene, then the statement is propositional. If no such evidence exists, then the statement is emotive (Lett 35). And then there is always the test of falsifiability which ascertains which is which, and to what degree they convey scientificity.

The test of falsifiability, notably discussed by Karl Popper, is based on the thesis that a statement is falsifiable if there is evidence that can prove it false (Lett 37). On the other hand, a statement is to be unfalsifiable if it is impossible to find evidence that can prove it false. Accordingly, “propositional statements are always falsifiable, and all falsifiable statements are both propositional and testable. Emotive statements are always nonfalsifiable, and all nonfalsifiable statements are either emotive or meaningless” (Lett 37). For a proposition to be scientific, consequently, evidence via empiricism, observation and/or physical experiments must be able to dispute it, to sustain its capability of being able to be (proven as) false. This science, however, and the way it supposedly constitutes the apogee of rationality and knowledge, is nothing but the domineering stereotypical image that is multiply presented and at times imposed on individuals. This is also the science those informants who unquestionably dismiss the evil eye and the supernatural look up to. For Lett and for those individuals

in Rethymno and Thessaloniki who dismiss the evil eye as non-falsifiable, the supernatural in general and the evil eye in particular should be conceived as a non-actual phenomenon, which can be easily misinterpreted and misperceived as physical and real, although it is not. Yet, the evil eye can be perceived. It is related to a sphere of being that is considered mystical and supernatural. At the same time, is also related to physicality, somatic attendance and sensory perception. It belongs to nature as much as to super-nature.

As scientific research develops, I believe it will be proved that people get evil eyed...but, nowadays, it is not scientifically explained, a logical person who respects himself would not believe in it...if someone argues today that the evil eye is psychodynamics and it is explicable in 'X' way, and I can prove it, nobody could then deny it. Anyway, I regard it as something that will be justified in the future.

This is what a Thessalonikan male student asserted while explaining his relationship to the evil eye. Another young male informant of mine in Rethymno expressed a similar opinion:

I do not believe in it, not necessarily because I do not believe it exists, but more like because I cannot understand it. In earlier days, people did not know what electricity was, how lightning occurred. Today, scientists have explained how and why they exist. If the power that causes the evil eye is to be proved someday and the whole process is decoded, then of course I will believe in it because it will become comprehensible to me.

This is an opinion I occasionally came to encounter, both in Crete and in northern Greece, mostly by men who were characterized by an uncertainty as to whether or not

they should integrate the evil eye in their life. They have chosen not to believe in the evil eye for the time being, in fear of being ridiculed by their scientifically-conscious friends, and due to their own personal preconceptions. But they are open and willing to do so in the future, provided that a scientific explanatory model is devised to explain its being in the world. While expressing scepticism, however, and refusing to accept the evil eye as rational until it is scientifically proved, almost all of those informants have had the ritual healing against it performed for them in many occasions. And, as they have admitted to the anthropologist, whenever a lay practitioner performs the ritual healing for them, namely whenever they experience the empiricism of the evil eye through the embodiment of ill-symptoms and its subsequent spiritual healing, they begin to think of the evil eye as both rational and mystical, empirical and supernatural.

In his infamous work on magic and witchcraft among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard argues that the Azande cosmology consists of both mystical and empirical thought. As Evans-Pritchard explains: “In speaking to Azande about witchcraft and in observing their reaction to situations of misfortune it was obvious that they did not attempt to account for the existence of phenomena by mystical causation alone. What they explained by witchcraft were the particular conditions in a chain of causation which related an individual to natural happenings” (21). The anthropologist notes throughout his book that, although the Azande do not have a conception of a natural order, like people in the West do, their thoughts and actions are rational and are based on empirical knowledge. Evans-Pritchard admits that he was very sceptical about the rationality of the Azande witchcraft beliefs. Yet, during his fieldwork he became a witness of bewitchment himself, and admitted that he did follow the Azande rational belief when he lived among them. He came to the conclusion that witchcraft beliefs

are logical for the Zande mind (Evans-Pritchard 16). Like Evans-Pritchard, my informants have followed a western epistemological discourse, and dismiss the evil eye in the name of rationality. They also appear very critical towards those who believe and practise the evil eye. Yet, whenever their western preconceptions about ‘natural order’ and the supernatural are challenged (as happens when they physically experience the evil eye, which they normally perceive as mystical and supernatural, through the embodiment of ill-symptoms and through the somatic relief that follows the ritual healing) they tend to reconsider their conceptualization of rationality, and begin to recognize the evil eye belief and practice as logical and rational.

A popularly created alliance between the evil eye and science has been constructed by a large number of Rethymniots and Thessalonikans, who have consistently attempted to legitimize the evil eye in the name of science. “Science admits it [the evil eye] exists. Scientists say so. The eye has something like a magnet and it goes and hits the other person through beams of electromagnetic waves”. The exchange of electromagnetic waves is a commonly offered explanatory model my informants have adopted, and which they regard as scientific. Their belief in the evil eye is assured. However, their need to cover their explanatory model with legitimation is also present. As far as they are concerned, the only way to validate the evil eye and prove it natural is to insert the word science into their rhetoric. It does not matter for them whether the invoked scientists do not really accept their point of view.

During my fieldwork, I talked to physicians, and ophthalmologists (eye doctors); both professions denied the assumption that the eyes can broadcast electromagnetic waves. Eye doctors were particularly meticulous when it comes to that. They tried to reassure me that “no thing such as electromagnetism stemming from the eyes exists in any scientific book and theory”, in the words of a

Thessalonikan ophthalmologist. However, according to a recently published article written by Ross, a medical doctor, there is a high possibility that the evil eye can be explained scientifically, since it is very likely that is caused by a transmission of electrophysiological signals through the eyes. Ultimately, my informants do not care whether their electromagnetic waves theory is absolutely accurate or not (although they have in instances quoted the afore-mentioned article by Ross, in order to legitimize the existence of the evil eye). As long as science is enclosed in the evil eye discourse, the belief is for them culturally and rationally legitimized.

After witnessing an evil eye ritual performed by an older woman in northern Greece, her husband, who was also present, commented at the end, with a tone of humour in his voice: “She is a scientist, better than a doctor!” Medicine is another scientific course of rationalized action. Physicians go through positive-science training before they can become health professionals. Equating a ritual healer with a scientist, therefore, might sound peculiar. However, when the evil eye healers admit they feel that they play the role of a doctor, since they make people feel well, and are hence scientists, the constructed parallel has to do more with their social role than their actual training. They are characterized, with or without hints of teasing, as scientists, because they possess knowledge of a realm where not everyone can claim expertise. Although the evil eye is so culturally widespread that everyone can actually claim knowledge of the practice, the efficacy of healing can only be achieved by the few who are deeply involved and know what they are doing.

In his classic paper “African Tradition and Western Science”, Horton asserts that traditional African belief systems construct theoretical rational assumptions, in the same way as modern science does. He makes the point that the Kalabari people of Nigeria exercise common sense during their everyday lives; they treat the (spirits of)

ancestors, heroes and water spirits as causal agents of their everyday life, which spirits, as Horton suggests, are equivalent to atoms, molecules and other western scientific entities. Throughout his article, Horton stresses the fact that the Kalabari way of everyday living questions the conflict between religion and science, natural and supernatural, mysticism and rationality. Following Horton, I want to argue that the same stands for people in Rethymno and Thessaloniki. They bring common sense and mysticism closer together through a socio-cultural path that escapes naturalism, and is connected with spiritual knowledge beyond the physical. This breaks science free from a painstakingly positivist natural and experimental episteme, and in turn infuses science and the evil eye with a new form of epistemological vigour, which seems to be standing more closely to the spiritual.

The fourth category consists of those who believe in the evil eye independently of any form of scientific vindication. “I believe in it. Even if positive sciences do not accept it, and despite my university education, I believe”, a female Rethymniot has maintained. The majority of the individuals belonging to this category are women. From a first glance, the stereotype that men are closer to physical sciences and figure it out better, whereas women are not so concerned with epistemological discourses, may seem to be reproducing itself here. Men were indeed keener on offering a scientific explanation on the evil eye. Women are more likely to accept it simply as such, without the need to sprinkle scientificity over the evil eye so as to legitimize it. Of course I have also met women who have engaged themselves in the act of epistemological sprinkling, as I have met men who accept the evil eye without any further scientific consideration. The women in my field sites seem to be more open to the supernatural, and to practices – the evil eye encompassed – which escape strict positivist boundaries, and find themselves under no obligation to become

scientifically justifiable. More to the point, for those Rethymniots and Thessalonikans science is not the only road to proof, explanation, and rational reasoning.

Sperber narrates an ethnographic incident from his fieldwork where, after having been invited by his informant to a dragon hunt, he dismisses his informant as irrational. Yet, he later goes on to embrace the incident as culturally reasonable. Sperber regretted the fact that his elderly informant never came to pick him up for the dragon hunt. The anthropologist also admitted that his initial reaction was wrong: if his informant believed that there was a dragon loose in the forest, his belief should be treated as rational and he should have respected it as it was expressed and almost [since the hunt never materialized] practised. Coming to agree with Sperber's last point, I argue that science and rationality play an important role in legitimating the evil eye practice. Yet, as advocated by my informants of the fourth category, the evil eye is not secluded inside the lockup of physical law and objectivity, and science is not the only road to rationality. What people in Rethymno and Thessaloniki believe in relation to the evil eye and the supernatural renders them rational as well.

The notions of rationality and relativism are central to the debate over scientific perceptions of the supernatural. "Relativism relates to rationalism in the sense that, in trying to understand the beliefs and practices of a specific society, the rationalism behind those beliefs and practices can perhaps only be understood if they are looked at within the specific cultural context within which they occur" (Petrus 2). Gellner rejects conceptual relativism, maintaining that it presupposes that "relativism asserts that there is no unique truth, no unique objective reality" (183). I do not concur with his statement. Relativism asserts that each truth is unique; each reality is unique, but not universally objective. As Tambiah has put it, "cultures and societies have their own distinctive systems of morality and social practices, which are 'right' for those

cultures and societies” (128).

The idea of social and cultural construction is thought to be problematic, because, if “truth” is a construct, then no one can grasp the “reality”, being imprisoned in her own knowledge-construction and reflection of self-presuppositions, without any detachment in order to reason about reality (Trigg 101-2, 106-7). Nevertheless, I argue that science is a sociocultural construction, and agree that claims to scientific objectivity must be suspect (Trigg 100). Besides, science is not at all a universally-valued domain. It is constructed by a few people, namely the scientists (Tambiah 114). In that sense, it is relativistic; and cultural (Franklin). Rationality forms an integral part of the supernatural, and should not be defined by the notion of hard-core scientific realism (Jensen 18), but, instead, it should be defined according to people’s perceptions, experiences, and beliefs.

Belief, Practice, Experience

When asked about their opinion concerning the evil eye, people in Rethymno and Thessaloniki immediately state their belief or their disbelief with regard to it. “I believe in the evil eye”, or “I do not believe in it at all”, are two of the most common phrases my informants have used in order to describe their trust and distrust, their religious affiliation and approval or disapproval towards the evil eye. Indeed, in the process of debating whether the evil eye should be considered present supernaturally, rationalized scientifically, sensed somatically and/or perceived spiritually, Rethymniots and Thessalonikans have continually talked about belief: belief in supernatural beings, belief in the evil eye, belief in science, belief in God, belief in spiritual forces, belief in energy exchange. My informants have presented their various forms of believing, while describing how their beliefs, and according to what and who they believe, affect their stance towards the evil eye.

For more than four decades now, the notion of belief has raised concerns among anthropologists, who have drawn attention to the problems and the analytical dangers the term can entail, and have called for its abandonment (Needham; Pouillon; Ruel). In a recent collection of the journal *Social Analysis*, entitled “Against Belief?”, the volume editors argue “for the virtues of writing ‘against’ – rather than ‘with’ – the term [belief] in ethnographic texts”, and that they find “belief” inadequate (Lindquist and Coleman 1). I agree with Needham, Ruel, Pouillon and Lindquist and Coleman that the anthropologists should not impose ethnographic authority on the people they study by forcing the notion of belief into their analysis. Yet, ignoring the ethnographic and theoretical significance of belief in my research would be a mistake. Belief exists as part of the Rethymniot and Thessalonikan everyday vocabulary. Through talking about their beliefs, my informants have expressed their convictions; they have talked about their thoughts, their doubts, and their experiences. Belief thus cannot be abandoned in this particular analysis. Although it is difficult to define specifically, since its meanings and uses vary significantly and change cross-culturally, the concept of belief can offer important insights about socio-cultural phenomena, and has definitely been analytically beneficiary as far as the evil eye practice is concerned.

The social universe of Tuva, a small country in the South of Siberia, is inhabited by both human and non-human beings (Lindquist 115). These non-human beings are the equivalent of what in western literature are called “spirits”, and they are invisible to lay people during their everyday lives. The only Tuvans who can see and communicate with them are certain ritual specialists, namely shamans and Buddhist lamas (Lindquist 117). Lindquist’s main point is that “for Tuvans the existence of spirits is not a matter of belief, understood as a proposition, cognitively held and consciously adhered to. Rather, it is a matter of social practice” (117). The ritual

practice, the anthropologist continues, is not symbolic but pragmatic, and treats “spirits” as real beings with varying social characteristics, roles, and positions.

Unlike Lindquist, I maintain that the existence of spiritual forces and the supernatural in Greece is for my informants about believing as much as it is about practising and doing. By maintaining that the evil eye is not only a matter of belief, but furthermore a matter of practice and experience, I am neither denying the usefulness of belief as a concept, nor am I trying to escape the analytical and theoretical difficulties that belief is likely to carry. One could argue that, by moving the evil eye closer to practice and experience, I might imply that practice and experience are more tangible than belief. The evil eye is strongly connected with issues of believing. Simultaneously, evil eye belief does not only consist of abstract ideas and intellectual representations. It is a belief that comes to be acted in practice.

Epilogue: Cosmological Manifestations of belonging

In this article, I have tried to present the dynamic ways with which people in Greece have engaged the supernatural in their conceptualization of the evil eye. In the course of talking about the supernatural, Rethymniots and Thessalonikans have willingly or less explicitly situated themselves in the cosmos. They have shown how the evil eye inhabits a physical, or embodied, space, a “location where human experience takes on material form” (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2). And how it also populates a spiritual space: an area situated beyond the scientifically natural world. As has been shown, they have mainly done so by evoking perception and science, while raising questions with regard to spirituality, religion, rationality, and physicality. The usual predetermined representation when it comes to the evil eye phenomenon rests on the assumption that there are two segments of cosmos: the perceivable, material, bodily, physical, and tangibly earthy; and the spiritual, immaterial, ethereal, and

supernatural. The evil eye, having a strong affinity with Orthodox Christianity, is usually placed in the second cosmos and is considered transcendental. Nevertheless, such a spatial bipolarity makes no sense.

By believing and disbelieving, scientifically explaining and sensorily perceiving, spiritually confronting and materially embodying, my informants transgress the obstacles that stand between belief and perception, and between the natural and the supernatural. People in Rethymno and Thessaloniki take action against the construction and maintenance of preconceptions that render the material sphere “scientific” and the spiritual “supernatural”. The evil eye acts within both spiritual and material spaces. Stepping away from the Cartesian framework, which does not leave any prospect of contact between the material and the supernatural world (Greenfield 156), the evil eye transforms the Cartesian dichotomy into a mutually interconnected rapport, rendering the dichotomization of the scientific-versus-the-supernatural obsolete.

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