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DOCTOR STRANGE

AND PHILOSOPHY

THE OTHER BOOK OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE



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DOCTOR STRANGE AND PHILOSOPHY

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**DOCTOR
STRANGE AND
PHILOSOPHY**
**THE OTHER BOOK OF
FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE**

**Edited by
Mark D. White**

WILEY Blackwell

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Contributors

The Philosophers Supreme

Philipp Berghofer is a Ph.D. candidate and lecturer at the University of Graz, Austria. He works primarily on phenomenology, epistemology, and the philosophy of physics, focusing on the concept of evidence. He is a recipient of a DOC Fellowship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Recently, he acquired the Eye of Agamotto at a local gift shop, and since then he has made many bargains.

Armond Boudreaux is the only assistant professor of English at East Georgia State College with a Captain America shield on his office wall. He has published three books, including *Titans: How Superheroes Can Help Us Understand a Polarized World* (with Corey Latta). He often regales his four children with tales of the superheroics of his youth—and they believe every word. Really.

Matthew William Brake is a graduate student at George Mason University pursuing a dual master's degree in philosophy and interdisciplinary studies, and has a Master of Divinity degree from Regent University. He has published numerous entries in the series *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, Resources*, volumes 15–18, from Ashgate, and blogs at www.popularcultureandtheology.com. Like Doctor Strange at Kamar-Taj, he banged on Mark White's door for hours to be allowed into this volume.

Skye C. Cleary teaches at Columbia University, Barnard College, and the City College of New York. She is the author of *Existentialism and Romantic Love*, managing editor of the Blog of the American Philosophical Association, and an advisory board member of Strategy of Mind. Her work has been published with *TED-Ed, Los Angeles*

Review of Books, *Aeon*, *Huffington Post*, *The Conversation*, *Business Insider*, *New Republic*, *The New Philosopher*, *The Philosophers' Magazine*, and others. While her favorite power of Doctor Strange is being able to pop into the library and borrow books without having to do the whole check-out thing, she wouldn't turn down the ability to fold time and space, especially when writing and grading deadlines loom over her like dark dimensions.

Paul DiGeorgio is an adjunct professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. He researches and writes on existentialism and phenomenology, and is very upset they've changed the wifi password at Kamar-Taj.

Sarah K. Donovan is an associate professor of philosophy at Wagner College in New York City. Her teaching and research interests include community-based, feminist, social, moral, and continental philosophy. She was one of the top three candidates for the position as Doctor Strange's new librarian, but was rejected for not tempering her philosophy with science. The position was eventually taken by Zelma Stanton.

George A. Dunn is a writer on philosophy and popular culture. In addition to contributing essays to numerous books in the Wiley-Blackwell series, he has edited or co-edited six books on philosophy and pop culture, most recently *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan* (Lexington Books, 2017) with Jason Eberl. George shares with Stephen Strange the fact that both have visited Mount Everest, though George made it only as far as base camp, and he only got that far as a passenger in an older van that was ill-equipped to absorb all the shocks of those winding, gravel-covered Himalayan roads, all the time wishing he had packed his sling ring.

Christopher P. Klofft is an associate professor of theology at Assumption College Worcester, MA. He is the author of *Living the Love Story: Catholic Morality in the Modern World* (Alba House, 2008) and lectures widely on issues of Catholicism and culture as well as marriage, family, and sexual ethics. He blogs at www.christopherklofft.com. Christopher prefers the *Summa Theologiae* to the Book of the Vishanti, but he might be willing to trade a copy of his dissertation for the Darkhold.

Dean A. Kowalski is professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha, and regularly teaches philosophy of religion,

Asian philosophy, and ethics. He is the author of *Classic Questions and Contemporary Film* (2nd edition, 2016) and *Moral Theory at the Movies* (2012). He is the editor of *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy* (2012), *The Philosophy of The X-Files*, revised edition (2009), and *Steven Spielberg and Philosophy* (2008), and the co-editor of *The Philosophy of Joss Whedon* (2011). He marvels at all the classic tomes he could read by mystically dislodging his astral form from his body, but he (sheepishly) admits he would probably just watch more Marvel movies.

Corey Latta is a writer, teacher, and public speaker who has written on subjects such as C.S. Lewis, philosophy, and the intersections of religion and literature. Corey holds master's degrees in religion and English as well as a Ph.D. in 20th Century Literature. He is the author of *C. S. Lewis and the Art of Writing*, *When the Eternal Can Be Met: The Bergsonian Theology of Time in the Works of C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden*, and co-author of *Titans: How Superheroes Can Help Us Make Sense of a Polarized World* (with Armond Boudreaux). Corey is currently Writer-in-Residence at Kamar-Taj, but he refuses to tell Paul DiGeorgio the new wifi password.

Sander H. Lee is professor of philosophy at Keene State College in New Hampshire. He is the author of *Woody Allen's Angst: Philosophical Commentaries on his Serious Films* (McFarland, 2013). Sander's essay, "Primo Levi's Gray Zone: Implications for Post-Holocaust Ethics," appeared recently in the journal *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. He has also written numerous additional essays on issues in aesthetics, ethics, Holocaust studies, social philosophy, and metaphysics. He has Doctor Strange's persistence but, unfortunately, none of his mystical abilities.

Michael Lyons is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at Trinity College Dublin. His work is predominantly in ethics, focusing on questions and problems of the more theoretical and fundamental variety. Having seen the 2016 film *Doctor Strange*, he thought it would be wonderful if he were able to say that Wong won a Wand of Watoomb.

Daniel P. Malloy teaches philosophy at Aims Community College in Greeley, Colorado. He has published numerous chapters on the intersections of philosophy and popular culture, including chapters on

Spider-Man, the Avengers, Iron Man, Batman, Green Lantern, and Deadpool. He tried to join the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth, but failed the physical.

Tuomas W. Manninen earned his Ph.D. in philosophy in 2007 from the University of Iowa, and is presently a senior lecturer at Arizona State University, where he teaches courses in critical thinking, philosophy of mind, political philosophy, and other assorted topics. Although he doesn't think he knows how the world works, he has internalized the lesson that not everything has to make sense. While he is not too keen about breaking the laws of nature, he thinks that learning about astral projection could help him immensely with his grading.

Carina Pape teaches at the University of Flensburg, Germany, and writes on moral philosophy, especially on gender and race, indignation, diversity, and philosophy of education. Instead of heading for Kathmandu to open her mind and change her reality, she decided to go to Kyoto University, Japan, where she's been doing research on cultural diversity as a visiting fellow. She grew up with four male cousins and one brother—from whom she snatched her first comic books—and realized early on that women make pretty good fighters too. Her role models are Socrates, Gamora from the Guardians of the Galaxy, O-Ren Ishii from *Kill Bill*, and of course, the (female) Ancient One, even though the latter conflicts with the Kantian within her from time to time.

Konstantin Pavliouts has a Ph.D in philosophy and works at Krasin Moscow State Vocational School, Russia. He is interested in the philosophy of space and time, and has published on the specific Indian comprehension of space and time problematics, as well as the philosophical foundations of social space and time categories in Western philosophy. He is also interested in the philosophical ideas in the literature of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. He'd like to experience Doctor Strange's spiritual transformation in Kamar-Taj as a philosopher, but would rather not become Sorcerer Supreme of the Earth, thank you very much.

Edwardo Pérez is an associate professor in the Department of English at Tarrant County College Northeast Campus in Hurst, Texas. When he's not teaching, he's writing essays, blogs, stories, poetry, and the occasional orchestral composition. When he's not writing,

he's thinking about philosophy, rhetoric, politics, and the infinite possibilities of the multiverse. Edwardo spends his free time studying the Book of Vishanti and practicing with the Axe of Angarruumus, the Ebony Blade, and Dragonfang (because you can never have enough magical weapons).

Nicholas Richardson is a professor in the Department of Physical Sciences at Wagner College in New York City, where he teaches general, advanced inorganic, and medicinal chemistry. He was one of the top three candidates for the position as Doctor Strange's new librarian, but was rejected for not tempering his science with philosophy. The position was eventually taken by Zelma Stanton.

Brendan Shea teaches philosophy at Rochester Community and Technical College in Minnesota, and is also a Resident Fellow at the Minnesota Center for Philosophy of Science. His teaching and research interests include the philosophy of science, biomedical ethics, logic, and the philosophy of religion. He's contributed over a dozen chapters to books on popular culture and philosophy, including volumes on *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Princess Bride*, and *Ender's Game*. He's studied Doctor Strange's work carefully in the hopes of picking up some magical skills, but his sorcerous talents (so far) are limited to an uncanny ability to make his socks disappear.

Chad William Timm is an associate professor of education at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. He teaches courses on the history and philosophy of education and specializes in examining ways to use pop culture as a vehicle to teach complex concepts. His work also appears in Wiley Blackwell volumes on *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *Game of Thrones*, *Ender's Game*, and *The Hunger Games*. While writing his chapter for this volume, he sought to embody the Socratic heroism of Doctor Strange, leading him to periodically blurt out exclamations in class like "By the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth!" and "By the Mystic Moons of Munnopor!" Unsurprisingly, his students gave him the highest course evaluations of his career.

Andrew T. Vink is a Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology at Boston College. He holds master's degrees in philosophy and theology from Marquette University in Wisconsin, and his research interests include philosophical theology, political theology, liberation theology, and the thought of Bernard Lonergan. When not buried under a pile of books

in the libraries of Kamar-Taj, Andrew sits patiently waiting for the next Marvel Cinematic Universe film with popcorn in hand.

Mark D. White is chair of the Department of Philosophy at the College of Staten Island/CUNY, where he teaches courses in philosophy, economics, and law. He has edited or co-edited six other volumes in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, including ones on Iron Man and the Avengers; contributed chapters to many more; and authored books on Captain America and *Civil War*. Someday he hopes to find a woman wearing Clea's awesome leggings, for then he will be sure he has found the one.

Bruce Wright is Regional Associate Dean of the Island Medical Program at the University of British Columbia, and Head of the Division of Medical Sciences at the University of Victoria. He has a research interest in medical education which has led to over fifty peer-reviewed publications in the areas of medical student career choice and medical school curriculum development. Of the many teaching awards he has received over the years the ones he cherishes most are those bestowed on him by medical students. He is trained in family medicine and has a special interest in geriatrics. He aspires to be like Doctor Strange and not simply strange, which appears to be what others think, while rockin' a perfectly coiffed Doctor Strange beard.

E. Paul Zehr is an award-winning science communicator, professor, author and martial artist at the University of Victoria. His popular science books *Becoming Batman*, *Inventing Iron Man*, *Project Superhero*, and *Chasing Captain America* use superheroes as metaphors exploring the science of human potential. In 2015, he won the Science Educator Award from the Society for Neuroscience, and *Project Superhero* won the Silver Medal for Juvenile fiction from the Independent Book Sellers of North America. He secretly wishes he had a real life Sanctum Sanctorum within which he could train with Wong.

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By the Glorious Grandiloquence of Gratitude!

I would like to thank Sian Jones at Wiley-Blackwell for guiding this book up the snowy mountains to the promised land of publication; the Series Editor Supreme, William Irwin, whom I would never dare call the Ancient One if he weren't so slow; and the contributors to this volume, without whom it would simply be a list of clever names of spells I made up while sculpting my goatee in the mirror on a Saturday night.

In all seriousness, I wish to thank all the brilliant creative minds that gave us this fascinating character and his world, including Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, Roy Thomas, Gene Colan, Steve Englehart, Frank Brunner, P. Craig Russell, Peter B. Gillis, Brian K. Vaughan, Marcos Martin, Brian Michael Bendis, Jonathan Hickman, Devin Grayson, Robbie Thompson, Javier Rodriguez, Jason Aaron, and Chris Bachalo. Thanks also go to everyone involved in making the 2016 film that brought this marvelous world to life, including Scott Derrickson, Kevin Feige, Jon Spaihts, C. Robert Cargill, Benedict Cumberbatch, Tilda Swinton, Benedict Wong, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Rachel McAdams, and all the other talented people in front of and behind the camera.

Introduction

Opening the Book of the Vishanti

In 1963, comics legends Stan Lee and Steve Ditko added a unique figure to the expanding Marvel Universe: Doctor Stephen Strange, a brilliant neurosurgeon turned Sorcerer Supreme, who stood as the Earth's sole defender against mystical threats from strange dimensions. (Their other famous creation, Spider-Man, was just a warm-up.) Combining Lee's affection for astonishing alliteration—"By the Mystic Moons of Munnopor!"—with Ditko's psychedelic panoramas, Doctor Strange was unique in a growing stable of heroes mostly based on the promise of science and the fear of radioactivity.

Since then, Doctor Strange has been a mainstay of the Marvel Universe, if not often a featured player, an appropriate position for a loner who prefers to serve his role in thankless solitude. With faithful Wong always at his side, and occasionally teaming up with Defenders, Avengers, and fellow mystics such as Clea and Brother Voodoo, Strange added a welcome maturity and stability to a world full of superpowered teens, impetuous Norse gods, and gamma-fueled rage machines.

In 2016, audiences outside the strange realm of comic book conventions and Wednesday pull-lists were exposed to a cinematic vision of Doctor Strange, deftly portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch alongside Benedict Wong, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Rachel McAdams, and the enigmatic Tilda Swinton as the Ancient One. Ditko's startling visions of alternate universes were reflected in dazzling color and three dimensions in front of our very eyes, and Lee's arrogant doctor came to life

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on the big screen where he was brought down a few pegs before being rebuilt as a noble self-sacrificing hero.

Fifty-plus years of comics adventures and a brilliant feature film provide us not only with tales of mind-bending mysticism and self-sacrificing heroics, but also a wealth of philosophical inspiration. How does Doctor Strange reconcile his belief in hard-boiled science with his mystical training? What does he mean when he tells the Ancient One they're just "tiny momentary specks within an indifferent universe"—and why was he wrong? What does his astral self say about the relationship between mind and body? And why is he always so alone? Two dozen of our dimension's Philosophers Supreme stand ready to help answer these questions and many more.

So don your Cloak of Levitation, light the Flames of the Faltine, and travel with us to the strange and marvelous world of magic, wonder ... and philosophy! (And despite the subtitle, there is no forbidden knowledge here, we promise!)

Part I

**“YOU’RE JUST ANOTHER
TINY, MOMENTARY SPECK
WITHIN AN INDIFFERENT
UNIVERSE”**

Bargaining with Eternity and Numbering One's Days

Medicine, Nietzsche, and Doctor Strange

George A. Dunn

From the standpoint of modern medicine, death is a failure—and one of the first things that we learn in the 2016 movie *Doctor Strange* is that Stephen Strange does not like to fail. In fact, at the time of the automobile accident that brought his brilliant career as a neurosurgeon to a tragic end, Stephen Strange and failure had apparently never yet crossed paths. He had a “perfect record,” as he casually reminded Nurse Billy in an offhand boast when Billy proposed that he help a “68-year-old female with an advanced brain stem glioma.” Such a diagnosis predicted a poor outcome that he would prefer not to have sully his résumé. At the same time, though, he doesn’t want to build his reputation on easy victories. He declines to help “a 35-year-old Air Force colonel who crushed his spine in some sort of experimental armor,” dismissing it as the surgical equivalent of child’s play: “I could help but so can fifty other people.”¹

So it’s no surprise that after Stephen’s catastrophic accident that crushes his hands, his world collapses. Physical therapy alone can never restore his hands to what they were before and—ironically, in light of his own practice of rejecting patients who might ruin his perfect record—another doctor rejects him as a candidate for a cutting-edge experimental treatment lest it fail and ruin the doctor’s reputation. Stephen’s entire professional life, outside of which he seems to have little else, has been about undoing damage and defying death. His own research has focused on the stimulation of neurogenesis in the

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central nervous system, restoring damaged neural tissue through a process that promises to save thousands of lives. His experience in the operating room is one of snatching patients from the jaws of death or, in at least one instance, restoring to life a patient who had already been declared brain dead. If death is failure for Stephen, the converse is also true after his accident—the failure to restore his hands is tantamount to death, the end of the only life that holds any meaning for him.

Heading East

“This isn’t the end. There are other things that can give your life meaning,” his friend and colleague Christine Palmer urges. “Like what? Like you?” he snaps back. Christine tries to shake Stephen of his obsession with reversing the irreversible and get him to accept that “some things just can’t be fixed.” But because he’s unable to envision a new life for himself, he clings to the unrecoverable past with mounting desperation and anger. That desperation finally drives him to Nepal, high in the Himalayas, in search of a miracle, to Kamar-Taj, where he becomes a student of the Ancient One. Though he hopes to learn the secret to restoring what was lost, he instead learns to surrender his attachment to the past and embrace transformation and mortality. As it turns out, that was the very same lesson that Christina was trying to teach him, but maybe Stephen first needed to travel to the other side of the world, to the exotic East, to sink to the absolute nadir of desperation, and then encounter that same truth wrapped in saffron robes before he could truly hear it.

Since at least the nineteenth century, it has become something of a cliché to view the East—the Indian subcontinent, the Himalayan regions, and the Far East in particular—as the repository of wisdom and spirituality, while the West has been depicted as an abode of soulless materialism where an ever-increasing store of scientific knowledge is coupled with a paucity of wisdom about how to use it well. Stephen Strange in many ways epitomizes the unflattering picture that these stereotypes paint of a spiritually desolate West. He’s a vain egoist engaged in a self-defeating attempt to control every facet of his world, a believer only in what’s given to his senses, trusting only in reason and science and living like an existential orphan in a universe that’s barren of any meaning or purpose except what we impose on it. “We are made of matter and nothing more,” he lectures the Ancient

One, reciting the creed of scientific materialism. “You’re just another tiny, momentary speck within an indifferent universe.”

Obviously, not every resident of Western civilization shares this worldview, which is at once bleak in its assessment of our existential plight and madly optimistic in its faith in our ability to bend this particular corner of our indifferent universe to our will through science, technology, and medicine. Still, it does represent an attitude that is at least native to the West, one that often claims as its warrant the tremendous power over nature that it has allowed us to achieve. We witness the bounty of this power in the early scenes of the movie that take place in the hospital, where Stephen deploys the most advanced medical technology, knowledge, and skill in the service of saving lives. Yet when he begins his training at Kamar-Taj, the Ancient One admonishes him, “Your intellect has taken you far in life but it will take you no further,” following that up with an instruction to “silence your ego.” If the West is hyper-rationalist and obsessed with subduing the forces of nature, the East of popular imagination is where one goes to gain the wisdom that begins with surrendering control and accepting the limits of reason.

Kamar-Taj is a Westerner’s dream of exotic Asian culture, an Orientalist pastiche of incongruous elements from diverse traditions that variously evoke an idea of the mystical, spiritually enlightened East. The Ancient One, who is not a Buddhist, wears the saffron robe of a Buddhist monk and shows Stephen a book containing diagrams of both Indian chakras (tantric centers of spiritual energy) and Chinese acupuncture points. Denizens of Kamar-Taj wear Japanese-inspired clothing and engage in martial arts training, while the Ancient One mouths various mystical-sounding clichés with sage-like solemnity (“At the root of existence, mind and matter meet; thoughts shape reality”). The Ancient One is obviously not of Asian heritage herself, however—we’re told that she’s Celtic, which vaguely associates her with a certain New Age image of occult wisdom and intimacy with nature drawn from the pre-Christian West. In the popular imagination, the Celts represent something like a remote outpost of Eastern wisdom in the West, one that is long gone, trampled under by the advance of Christianity. But what this imaginary, hybrid, trope-laden Asian landscape signifies is not so much the reality of Asian civilizations, but rather a sense that, despite the manifold successes of Western science and technology, something vital has been lost along the way, something that this fantasy imagines still exists elsewhere. As Stephen tells Christine upon his return, “After Western medicine failed me, I headed East.”

“Matter and Nothing More”

Stephen speaks of Western medicine, but it might be more accurate to refer to modern medicine, since the kind of medical practice in which Stephen was engaged is bound up with a set of ideas and aspirations regarding humanity’s place in nature that emerged only in the seventeenth century in tandem with the scientific revolution. Among the intellectual guiding lights of this revolution were two great philosophers: Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650). Because Bacon came first, the project that he and Descartes initiated is often referred to as the Baconian project.

This project, which came to shape Western civilization and then in due course the emerging civilization of global modernity, was guided by the imperative to reduce human suffering—“to subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity,” as Bacon put it—and to expand the realm of human freedom through the technological conquest of nature.² Descartes was even more blunt about the aims of this project: the new technology enabled by a proper science of the natural world promised to make us “the masters and possessors of nature,” which was

desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of devices that would enable us to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the Earth and all the goods found there, but also principally for the maintenance of health, which is the first good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life.³

Consequently, for Descartes, the indefinite lengthening of human life was to be the crowning achievement of modern science. “The preservation of health has always been the principal end of my studies,” he wrote.⁴ Whereas the goal of pre-modern medicine was to care for the sick and the dying, in full awareness that not every ailment could be cured and that death was inevitable, within the context of the Baconian project, any limitation on human powers is an insult to our autonomy, a challenge to be overcome, and a summons for us to reclaim control of our existence. For Descartes, as for Doctor Stephen Strange, death is an enemy to be subdued.⁵

It’s more than a little ironic, then, that, as contemporary philosopher (and physician) Jeffrey Bishop points out, the human body as conceived within the Baconian project is essentially a dead body, as opposed to the living, suffering, fully animated body of someone with a particular identity, history, hopes, fears, and loved ones.⁶ It’s not just

that, for most medical students learning the techniques of surgery, “their first patient is dead [a cadaver], literally patient beneath the dissecting knife.”⁷ Rather, it’s that the body is approached as a machine, albeit one of dazzling intricacy, to be studied, manipulated, and repaired in ways that are analogous to how a mechanic fixes an inanimate contraption that is broken. Stephen’s belief that we are matter and nothing more simply reflects the way medicine approaches the human body.

The anesthetized body on Stephen’s operating table at Metro-General Hospital is for all practical purposes indistinguishable from a corpse. Indeed, it would have been treated no differently than a corpse, its organs harvested while the heart was still beating, if Stephen had not overruled the treating physician’s misdiagnosis of brain death. Hospitals are places of efficient operations and high tech instruments, where bodies are objects whose inner workings are skillfully manipulated to produce the desired effects. It is no accident that the medical art turns living bodies into passive objects, since otherwise it would be impossible to make reliable predictions about them and gain some measure of control over their machinery. As Bishop observes, “Life is in flux, and it is difficult to make truth claims about matter in motion, about bodies in flux. Thus, life is no foundation upon which to build a true science of medicine.”⁸

Looking Beyond Death

Of course, to say that doctors relate to their patients’ bodies as machines to be repaired, rather than as the bodies of living beings, doesn’t mean that doctors don’t care for their patients. Christine Palmer obviously cares a great deal about her patients in the Metro-General emergency room. And in a certain way the exclusive focus on the machinery of the body to the neglect of the “whole person” makes medicine a highly ethical discipline, strictly impartial and fundamentally egalitarian. Unlike Stephen, Christine doesn’t believe it’s beneath her to come into work just to save the life of a “drunk idiot with a gun” or “another dreg of humanity,” as Stephen describes her patients. The mission of a doctor is to save lives, not to make judgments about the worth of those lives, a restricted mission that coincides with the doctor’s restricted sphere of competence. Doctors can keep our bodies alive, often for a very long time, but they can’t tell us what our lives are good for and, consequently, they can’t tell us when it would be

best to gracefully—and gratefully—let go of life. The goal is no longer living out a natural lifespan, whatever that could mean once the Baconian project has persuaded us that natural limits are given to us only to be surpassed, but simply more and more life—like the Ancient One stealing centuries of life from the Dark Dimension until she’s finally defeated by an external power. For modern medicine, too, death is always a defeat, a failure to deliver on its implicit promise of a cure.

And that’s one of the problems with the Baconian project. When the paramount passion of our civilization becomes the conquest of nature, it’s hard to imagine on what basis we could assign any non-arbitrary limits to that conquest. So our expectations of medicine, as well as our expectations of human power and ingenuity more generally, grow to be increasingly immodest. Any limitation of our powers becomes an affront, an intolerable absurdity in a universe that should be made to bend to our will, which is precisely how Stephen experiences the news that even the most advanced medicine can’t undo the damage done to his hands. Such news is world-shattering for him—and not just in the sense that it marks the end of the life he had made for himself as an acclaimed surgeon at the pinnacle of success in his field. It also represents a crisis in his Baconian worldview, its shipwreck on the shoals of harsh, unalterable reality.

The Ancient One chides Stephen for his “overinflated ego,” discerning that he wants “to go back to the delusion that you can control anything, even death, which no one can control. Not even the great doctor Stephen Strange.” Though apparently referring to Stephen’s peculiar personal shortcomings, her words are really an indictment of the entire Baconian project that had captured his imagination—and that of the modern West—and shaped his view of the world before failing him and leading him to the brink of despair. And whether Stephen fully realizes it or not, recoiling from the failure of that project was what his journey to the East was really all about.

“The World Is Not What It Ought to Be”

We don’t need to head east in order to find a critique of the aspirations of the modern West. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) believed that the goal of the Baconian project to overcome “the necessities and miseries of mankind,” its twofold ambition of eliminating suffering and forestalling death, sought objects that were neither possible

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