

Descriptive Analysis of Experience and Appraisal: The Case of Crowley Receiving *The Book of the Law*

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The sources:

1904: the manuscript of *The Book of the Law*

1907: annotations on the front of the manuscript

1912: Autobiographical account (“Temple of Solomon the King”, *The Equinox* 1.7-1.8)

1920: Autobiographical account (“Remarks on the Method of Receiving Liber Legis...”, written 1920, Abbey of Thelema, Cefalù, Sicily).

1929: Autobiographical account (*Confessions of Aleister Crowley*– written late 1920s)

Note on the analysis:

The table below systematizes the various accounts that Crowley gave of the reception of *The Book of the Law* in Cairo in 1904, loosely following the method of Descriptive Analysis laid out in Taves (2009). It focuses only on accounts of the writing of the book itself (April 8-10), teasing apart claims on intended behavior, unintended experience, and the associated cause and reason explanations. A fuller treatment should include the experiences leading up to the writing (March 16 – April 7), notably the rituals and mediumistic experiments with Crowley’s wife. This would reveal an even more complex attribution process, and provide additional context to explanations offered for the later events. I have made notes on this where deemed necessary.

The analysis reveals three points of interest about the shifting emphasis on Crowley’s accounts over time. First, descriptions of what happened (both in terms of intended behavior events and unintended experience event) remain stable over time. Second, as time passes, accounts spend much more time on explanations; they become more elaborate, and draw on an expanding range of evidence and argumentation. Comparing 1912 and 1920 is striking in this regard: the largely agnostic attitude of 1912 is exchanged for strong positive statements in 1920. Third, the nature of the explanations goes from cause explanations to reason explanations. This is to be expected as Crowley seeks reasons for the revelation in the actions of discarnate spiritual entities, possessive of independent (and vastly superior) minds (cf. Pasi 2011). The importance of these discarnate “intelligences” is increasingly stressed in the later accounts, and the “unintentional experience event” turns into the “intentional event” of another, external agent’s behavior.

Finally, it is useful to draw on another distinction from Malle (via Taves 2009, pp. 101-102), between *private* and *communicative* explanations. We are mostly studying *communicative* explanations (although the earliest ones are somewhat less so). 1912 and 1920 were both written for followers; 1929 was written with a wider audience in mind. This is pretty significant, because we see that Crowley’s explanations become more elaborate and also more geared towards external, discarnate, superhuman agents just as he gets more involved with building a new religious community and proselytizing this to the masses (1920s onwards). Following Malle, these communicative explanations must be seen as connected to a process of *behavior management*: they

establish Crowley as the prophet, and generate a range of possible social roles (believers, devotees, interpreters of scripture, skeptics and apostates, insiders and outsiders). It also generates practices surrounding the entities claimed as causal agents, and the text that they legitimize.

References:

Malle, Bertram F. 2004. *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Pasi, Marco. 2011. "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 6.2: 123-162.

Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cairo Working: Reception of <i>The Book of the Law</i>, April 8–10, 1904.	
Intended behavior event (what he did)	
1904	No data (but diaries and notebooks document numerous intended magical rituals in weeks leading up to the event. Each of these episodes are complex combinations of intended behavior events, unintended experience events, and shifting attributions, that would require separate analysis.
1907	No data
1912	"It must have been on the 7 th of April that W. [RC] commanded P. [AC] (now somewhat cowed) to enter the "temple" exactly at 12 o'clock noon on three successive days and to write down what he should hear, rising exactly at 1 o'clock. This he did."
1920	"I went into the "temple" a minute early, so as to shut the door and sit down on the stroke of Noon." "I imagine that some preparations were made, possibly some precautions against disturbance, possibly some bull's blood burned for incense, or orders taken about details of dress or diet; I remember nothing at all one way or the other. Bull's blood was burnt at some time in this sojourn in Cairo, but I forget why or when."
1929	Rose told him to enter the room "exactly at noon on April 8 th , 9 th , and 10 th , and write down what I heard, rising exactly at one o'clock. This I did." [Almost identical to 1912].
Reason explanation (why he did it)	
1904/ 1907	No data
1912/ 1920/ 1929	He did it because his wife (acting as medium for Horus) had commanded him to. Promises of receiving important messages about a new order and a new age, which he should record. 'By April 8 th I had been convinced of the reality of the communication [from Horus through Rose] and obeyed my wife's arbitrary instructions with a certain confidence. I retained my sceptical attitude none the less.' (1929)
Unintended experience event [what happened]	

1904	Handwritten manuscript: "Liber L vel Legis, given from the mouth of Aiwass to the ear of the Beast on April 8, 9, & 10, 1904"
1907	Message "from the mouth of Aiwass to the ear of the Beast". "I am in no way responsible for any of these documents"
1912	"...heard clearly and distinctly the human articulate accents of a man". AC wrote down what he heard, under great time pressure.
1920	"The Voice of Aiwass came apparently from over my left shoulder ... strong impression that the speaker was actually in the corner where he seemed to be, in a body of "fine matter". Aiwass was "felt" [bodily sensation, presence] and "seen" in the imagination [visualization]. Detailed descriptions of sonic qualities of voice, imaginal impressions of the figure, some ambiguous emotional reactions.
1929	No further description of event.
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1904	Aiwass spoke to Crowley.
1907	"... a highly interesting example of genuine automatic writing."
1912	"with regard to the writing of <i>Liber Legis</i> , Fra. P. [AC] will only say that it is in no way "automatic writing," that he heard clearly and distinctly the human articulate accents of a man." "... whether Aiwass is a spiritual being, or a man known to Fra. P., is a matter of the merest conjecture."
1920	" 'Who wrote these words?' Of course I wrote them, ink on paper, in the material sense; but they are not my words, unless Aiwaz be taken to be no more than my subconscious self, or to be a part of it In any case, whatever "Aiwaz" is, "Aiwaz" is an Intelligence possessed of power and knowledge absolutely beyond human experience; and therefore Aiwaz is a Being worthy, as the current use of the word allows, of the title of a God" "... to me <i>at that time</i> Aiwass was an "angel" such as I had often seen in visions, a being purely astral [old attribution – not previously spelled out]. <i>I now incline to believe that</i> Aiwass is not only the God or Demon or Devil once held holy in Sumer, and mine own Guardian Angel, but also a man as I am, insofar as He uses a human body to make His magical link with Mankind, whom he loves, and that He is thus an Ipsissimus, the Head of the AA."
1929	Aiwass did it, and left evidence that Aiwass is not merely Crowley's own unconscious. "We are forced to conclude that the author of <i>The Book of the Law</i> is an intelligence both alien and superior to myself, yet acquainted with my inmost secrets; and, most important point of all, that this intelligence is discarnate." (197) "The existence of true religion presupposes that of some discarnate intelligence, whether we call him God or anything else. And this is exactly what no religion had ever proved scientifically. And this is what <i>The Book of the Law</i> does prove by internal evidence, altogether independent of any statement of mine. This proof is evidently the most important step in science that could possibly be made: for it opens up an entirely new avenue to knowledge. The immense superiority of this particular intelligence, AIWASS, to any other with which

	<p>mankind has yet been in conscious communication is shown not merely by the character of the Book itself, but by the fact of his comprehending perfectly the nature of the proof necessary to demonstrate the fact of his own existence and the conditions of that existence. And, further, having provided the proof required.” (197)</p> <p>“Our real reason for attributing consciousness to our fellow-men is that the similarity of our structure enables us to communicate by means of language, and as soon as we invent a language in which we can talk to anything soever, we begin to find evidence of consciousness. The way is therefore clear for me to come forward and assert positively that I have opened up communication with one such intelligence; or, rather, that I have been selected by him to receive the first message from a new order of beings.”</p>
<p>Reason explanation (why <i>Aiwass</i> did it)</p>	
1904	<p>No explicit reason given, but notes of the rituals leading up to the event show Crowley attributing reasons to gods and entities. I.e. result of invocations of Horus on March 20: “Revealed that the Equinox of the Gods is come, Horus taking the Throne in the East & all rituals etc. being abrogated.”</p> <p>“... Great success in midnight invocation. I am to formulate a new link of an order with the solar force.” [Horus et al. are dispensing the “old order” – entities will reach out to Crowley with new rituals]</p>
1907	<p>No reasons given.</p>
1912	<p>No clear reasons given.</p>
1920	<p>Aiwass wants to “make His magical link with Mankind, whom he Loves”.</p>
1929	<p>‘Various considerations showed me that the Secret Chiefs ... had sent a messenger to confer upon me the position which [Samuel Lidell] Mathers had forfeited.’ [i.e., a chief magus of the Golden Dawn].</p> <p>Aiwass has “selected” Crowley “to receive the first message from a new order of beings”.</p>
<p>Intended behavior event + reason explanation [what he did and why he did it – these are retrospective accounts of his early responses to the Book]</p>	
1904	<p>No data</p>
1907	<p>Published the material even though AC not responsible for it. Reason: “because I believe that their intelligent study may be interesting & helpful.”</p>
1912	<p>“It was about a fortnight after the writing of "Liber Legis" that Fra. P. left Egypt for the grey skies of the Scottish Highlands, where, with the Seer, he began to put into practice the experiments suggested in the Book of the Law.</p> <p>The astounding success of these experiments would have convinced any other man of the reality of his experiences, and induced him to devote his life absolutely to the work enjoined; but Fra. P. was not made of common clay. He issued a careless manifesto, calling upon the Universe to adore, and nothing particular coming of this, he lost interest.”</p>

1920	<p>Behavior: struggled against the book, tired to depreciate its value. Reason: he was unconvinced of its message and authenticity. "Frater Perdurabo, to whom this revelation was made with so many signs and wonders, was himself unconvinced. He struggled against it for years."</p>
1929	<p>Behavior: making the revelation known, but without full commitment. Reason: He resented the message of the book.</p> <p>"I had the manuscript typed. I issued a circular letter to a number of my friends, something in the nature of a proclamation of the New Aeon, but I took no trouble to follow it up. I took a certain number of wide-reaching plans for assuming responsibility, but they remained in the stage of reverie. I dropped the whole business, to all intents and purposes. I completely abandoned my diary. I even neglected a really first-rate opportunity for bringing <i>The Book of the Law</i> into public notice, for Mrs. Besant was on the ship by which Ouarda and I returned to Europe, and I conversed a great deal with her about sacred subjects."</p> <p>"The fact of the matter was that I resented <i>The Book of the Law</i> with my whole soul. For one thing, it knocked my Buddhism completely on the head. <i>Remember all ye that existence is pure joy; that all the sorrows are but as shadows; they pass e³ are done; but there is that which remains</i> [quotation from the book]. I was bitterly opposed to the principles of the Book on almost every point of morality."</p>