



# Why is Reason a Vice? Empiricism, Rationalism, and Condemnation of Science in H. C. Andersen’s “The Snow Queen”

*Katariina Kärkelä*

*Abstract:* This article studies the empiricist and rationalist worldviews presented in H. C. Andersen’s enigmatic fairy tale “The Snow Queen”. These two epistemic views are in contest not only with one another but also with the Christian doctrine that challenges them both and is offered in the tale as their superior alternative. While the empiricist and rationalist worldviews give the tale its epistemic aspects, the strong emphasis on Christian faith brings central ethical problems to the discussion, motivating the title’s question: why is reason a vice? By showing how empiricism and rationalism are presented in “The Snow Queen” and become embodied in the mirror-motif, this study seeks to provide an answer to the most disturbing ethical dilemma of the tale: scientific worldviews, such as empiricism and rationalism, and the Snow Queen herself in particular, are in the tale viewed as immoral and deceitful and abhorred by the protagonists, but this notion is in fact falsified by the tale’s own logic.

Keywords: H. C. Andersen, “The Snow Queen”, empiricism, literature and philosophy, rationalism

## 1. Introduction

“The Snow Queen” (“Snedronningen”, first published in 1845) is without a doubt one of H. C. Andersen’s most famous fairy tales. It is also one of the most complicated and enigmatic, not least because of the ambivalent title character

herself. This article has two purposes: first, to find out how empiricism and rationalism are presented in the world of the tale by analysing the famous mirror-motif, and to show how they comport with the marvel and enchantment of fairy tales; and second, to show how empiricism and rationalism are challenged by Christian doctrine, and in this analysis arises one particularly significant ethical dilemma: viewing reason as a vice. Already in the beginning it should be noted that Andersen's tale very systematically works through several binaries, weaving strong tensions between empiricism and rationalism, childhood and adulthood, moral virtue and reason, science and Christian doctrine. This article is primarily interested in the first pair, empiricism and rationalism, but another juxtaposition emerges when the aspect of Christianity is taken into account: empiricism and rationalism become representatives of science, which Christian faith attacks.

The main ethical problem that emerges in the latter section is tightly intertwined with the moral positions assumed in the tale, particularly treating scientific worldviews and the Snow Queen herself as immoral or evil: as examples will later show, several characters of the tale, both humans and animals, express fear, anger, or doubt when talking about the Snow Queen and everything she represents. That being said, the moral estimations – or, misinterpretations – with which this article is concerned are those uttered by characters and taken as peremptory postulates in the world of the story. This misinterpretation originates in a confusion between right as in ethical and right as in correct – in other words, moral value and truth value. The Snow Queen stands first and foremost for science and reason, and the moral estimations made about her within the tale – the estimations that view her as the villain – overlook one of the most defining characteristics of science: neutrality and objectivity. In short, the tale presents three alternatives for making sense of the surrounding reality – empiricism, rationalism, and Christian faith – and while the tale favours faith over the other two, this preference is founded on arguments that are erroneous from the outset.

“The Snow Queen” tells the story of two young children, Gerda and Kay, dear friends whose idyllic life is disrupted by two separate incidents. The first of these incidents, and one that sets the story in motion, is the breaking of the Devil's mirror. The Devil, having devised a mirror that distorts everything it reflects, wants to use his work to mock God and the angels, but as he and other lesser demons are flying towards heaven, they accidentally drop the mirror. The glass fragments are shattered all over the world, ending up in people's hearts and eyes, and thus distorting their perception and thinking. This is what happens to Kay, whose character changes significantly, to Gerda's great grief: he begins to scorn the everyday beauty and marvels of the world, rejecting its small joys and focusing all his energy and interest on science, observation, and reason. The second incident is Kay's abduction by the Snow Queen – although the word *abduction* is in this case questionable, as Kay leaves with her willingly. After Kay's sudden disappearance, Gerda begins a difficult journey to find him and bring him back home. Throughout her journey Gerda is aided by several characters, both animals and people, who are all awed by her selflessness and resilience.

The theoretical frames this article discusses very much arise from the tale itself: “The Snow Queen” is complicated, often openly philosophical, and as fragmented as the Snow Queen's Mirror of Reason in the palace. However, the

tale has evoked fairly little philosophical interest, Erica Weitzman's insightful article "The World in Pieces: Concepts of Anxiety in H. C. Andersen's 'The Snow Queen'" being a rare and intriguing example of a philosophical reading. It is surprising that a tale that offers several interpretational perspectives on science and philosophy has been so seldom discussed in this context. This could be a trace of a long-prevailing dismissive attitude toward fairy tales and fantasy in general, as well as their deeper aspects, based on their assumed audience (see, for instance, Tolkien 129–30; Windling 36; Le Guin 86). This paper aims to provide convincing reasons for studying fairy tales from a philosophical perspective that particularly incorporates the aspects of worldview and sense-making.

The following analysis focuses especially on the two mirrors of the tale: the Devil's mirror and the Mirror of Reason that is set in the Snow Queen's ice palace, which can be read as representing the rivalling epistemic worldviews of the tale, and the theoretical context of which is primarily based on Cartesian scepticism and the main division between empiricism, which is based on perception, and rationalism, which leans on reason and deduction. My interpretations will also draw from previous studies of Andersen's tales, particularly the analyses by Weitzman and Jørgen Johansen, as well as Jennifer Miller's reading, which provides an important point of reference for the relationship between fairy tales and fantasy. The analysis begins with an examination of the two mirrors and their role as the representatives of empiricism and rationalism. The second part of the analysis introduces a third contestant, Christian faith, that attacks both empiricism and rationalism as representatives of science.

## **2. Alternative Epistemic Worldviews in the Two Mirrors**

The theoretical background of this section leans on the basic distinction between empiricism and rationalism, two main constituents of the epistemic whole of Andersen's tale. Certain core concepts need to be clarified before entering the analysis, even though their nuances and the historically vast philosophical discussion behind them cannot be studied in depth here. Both empiricism and rationalism are schools of thought in epistemology, a major philosophical branch that studies knowledge and its limitations, possibilities, and requirements. Epistemology's areas of interest include, for instance, sources of knowledge, the concept of knowledge itself, beliefs, and justification (BonJour 10, 12; Meyers 4). Empiricism and rationalism are only two of many epistemological branches; however, they are central in discussions concerning the source and reliability of knowledge, and for the interests of this article they are the most important epistemological theories. Empiricism can be briefly defined as an epistemological view according to which knowledge comes solely or primarily from sensory experience and perception; in comparison, rationalism considers reason to be the chief source of knowledge (Meyers 2–3). While the long history of empiricism proves that it encompasses many and diverse views, certain core assumptions remain. Robert Meyers, for instance, writes:

Real existence can be proved only by real existence and our only evidence for this is experience, that is, *external perception* of things outside us and *internal perception* of our own existence and the workings of our minds. This is a clear expression of empiricism: all knowledge of real existence must be based on the senses or self-consciousness, that is, on experience. (1-2, emphasis original)

In other words, empiricism approaches the world and gathers knowledge about it through perception: senses and experience are the chief source of knowledge, and rational thinking and deduction alone cannot provide sufficient information about the world. In contrast, rationalism assumes that some, if not all, knowledge is *a priori*; that is, it precedes sensory experience or is justified independently of experience. This is the key difference between empiricism and rationalism (Meyers 3).

The two mirrors, and the Devil's mirror in particular, are central to the plot of "The Snow Queen", but their philosophical significance is equally important. Earlier analyses of the story have focused on the mirrors: Veronica Schanoes begins her study on mirrors in fairy tales by stating, "The traditional tale of Snow White and Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' both revolve around a wicked queen who uses an enchanted looking-glass" (5). In this opening there are two things with which I, while fully appreciating the article's interpretations, disagree<sup>1</sup>. First, the title character of "The Snow Queen" is not wicked; second, her looking-glass, the Mirror of Reason, is not enchanted.

Weitzman approaches the tale with respect to Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy, particularly the concepts of anxiety and despair. Andersen and Kierkegaard both perceive faith as the only solution to despair (although Kierkegaard's approach is ironic), and Weitzman examines the differences and similarities between their ideas. Alongside the themes of melancholy, sexuality, and recovery are reason and knowledge: Weitzman writes that "the Snow Queen's seduction is also – and much more overtly – the seduction of absolute knowledge" (1106); this observation is at the very core of what "The Snow Queen" is about. Irony, too, is an important concept in Weitzman's analysis, especially her treatment of the Devil's mirror: she ponders the nature of irony and its relationship with doubt in Kierkegaard's philosophy (1109–10). My emphasis is not so much on irony, mockery, and despair as on the epistemic issues that Weitzman's article touches but does not resolve entirely: particularly, *why is reason a vice?*

An empiricist approach to understanding the world is represented in "The Snow Queen" by the Devil's mirror, which sets the story in motion. The Devil creates a mirror that wholly distorts everything it reflects, and in doing so corrupts perception and its reliability:

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that Schanoes's analyses focus on the contemporary revisions of traditional fairy tales, not their earliest versions; with respect to "The Snow Queen", for instance, Schanoes studies Kelly Link's short story "Travels with the Snow Queen". The cited remark, however, specifically refers to Andersen's tale even though the later interpretations focus on Link's revision.

En dag var han i et rigtigt godt humør, thi han havde lavet et spejl, der havde den egenskab, at alt godt og smukt, som spejlede sig deri, krøb sammen til næsten ingenting, men hvad der ikke duede og tog sig ilde ud, det trådte ret frem og blev endnu værre.

De dejligste landskaber så ud deri som kogt spinat, og de bedste mennesker blev ækle eller stod på hovedet uden mave; ansigterne blev så fordrejede, at de ikke var til at kende, og havde man en fregne, så kunne man være så vis på, at den løb ud over næse og mund. (“Snedronningen” 186)<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, what the small devils greatly rejoice in is their belief that “nu kunne man først se ... hvorledes verden og menneskene rigtigt så ud” (“Snedronningen” 187).<sup>3</sup> Despite the distorting and corrupting power of the mirror, their understanding is that it reveals the true nature of people and the surrounding reality, something that cannot be found through direct perception. Regarding Kierkegaard’s notion of irony and doubt, Weitzman writes, “Doubt despairs that it cannot reach the essence through the phenomenon; irony thinks that it has the essence as its own power of negation” (1110). This is the truth the lesser demons adopt in their hubris, believing that they can indeed reach the truth and access the world *an sich* because of their mockery, by twisting and perverting.

The Devil’s mirror treats perceptual knowledge brutally. It severely compromises and questions the overall reliability of perceptual knowledge and introduces an alternative truth regarding the visual comprehension of the world: the reality seen through the mirror is, according to the devils, the world as it truly is. The everyday worldview is questioned and falsified, presented as an illusion that has finally been mended with the Devil’s lens. The worldview offered by the devils could be summarised as follows: sensory perception, sight in particular, *can* indeed offer reliable knowledge of the world, but only when filtered through the distorting mirror; unmediated vision is an illusion. One of the most intriguing questions regarding the empiricist perspective and the very problematic relationship between the physical reality and the observer concerns the correspondence between the image formed by the observer and the physical form of the thing observed: what the devils imply is that the distorted image in the viewer’s eyes – of a pleasant landscape replaced by something that looks like cooked spinach, for instance – is correct whether it is concordant with the outer reality or not. This notion comes close to the fundamental epistemological and empirical problems of acquiring knowledge about physical reality and, indeed, the very existence of an outer reality. In sense-datum theories, knowledge is not acquired about the physical world as such; rather, the mind perceives the inner ideas, or so-called *sense data*, caused by physical objects (Meyers 79, 118–19). The truth offered by the mirror holds

<sup>2</sup> “One day the devil was in a very good humor because he had just finished a mirror which had this peculiar power: everything good and beautiful that was reflected in it seemed to dwindle to almost nothing at all, while everything that was worthless and ugly became most conspicuous and even uglier than ever. In this mirror the loveliest landscapes looked like boiled spinach, and the very best people became hideous, or stood on their heads and had no stomachs. Their faces were distorted beyond any recognition, and if a person had a freckle it was sure to spread until it covered both nose and mouth” (“Snow Queen” 5–6).

All translations of “The Snow Queen” will be from Jean Hersholt’s widely known and much-used translation.

<sup>3</sup> “Now ... for the very first time you could see how the world and its people really looked” (“Snow Queen” 6).

on to the inner images regardless of what the physical reality actually looks like: the image or sense datum formed in the viewer's eye and mind, first filtered by the mirror, is the only reliable image accessible to the observer.

The mirror questions everyday perception, but it can become a target of scepticism itself, too, for obvious reasons. If the Devil's mirror is read as the representative of an empiricist worldview, the Devil himself can be interpreted as a very literal fictional instance of the Cartesian demon. René Descartes illustrated his version of methodological scepticism by devising two main arguments: the dream argument and the idea of the evil demon. Unwilling to believe that God in his goodness would deceive people, Descartes entertains the thought of an evil genius: a mighty, malevolent demon that is putting all his formidable cunning into attempts to deceive humanity:

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things ... (Descartes 13).

All experience is controlled by the demon, and perception is therefore unsure: all sensory observations and the inferences based on them are fallible, for the demon may alter the physical, perceptual world and human observations alike. With this formulation, Descartes, the rationalist philosopher, seeks to show that no perceptual knowledge can ever be trusted. It must, however, be kept in mind that whereas the Cartesian demon is first and foremost a methodical construction of scepticism, in Andersen's tale the Devil is a true character who quite literally corrupts the reliability of perceptual knowledge.

While the most prominent characteristic of the mirror is its ability to pervert and confuse sensory perception, it cannot be ignored that the mirror can also detect inner cues, such as personality traits, moral positions, and thoughts. This matter becomes crucial in the latter section of the analysis, and I claim that the mirror serves as a piece of evidence that reveals the tale's greatest ethical misinterpretation. Before moving on to the ethical questions, I will examine the rationalist epistemic notions and worldview represented by the Mirror of Reason and, by extension, the Snow Queen herself. The Mirror of Reason, splintered yet whole, is set in her vast halls:

Midt derinde i den tomme, uendelige snesal var der en frossen sø. Den var revnet i tusinde stykker, men hvert stykke var så akkurat lig det andet, at det var et helt kunststykke, og midt på den sad snedronningen, når hun var hjemme, og så sagde hun, at hun sad i forstandens spejl, og at det var det eneste og bedste i denne verden. ("Snedronningen" 236)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "In the middle of the vast, empty hall of snow was a frozen lake. It was cracked into a thousand pieces, but each piece was shaped so exactly like the others that it seemed a work of wonderful craftsmanship. The Snow Queen sat in the exact center of it when she was at home, and she spoke of this as sitting on her 'Mirror of Reason.' She said this mirror was the only one of its kind, and the best thing in all the world" ("Snow Queen" 58).

The most interesting difference between the Devil's mirror and the Mirror of Reason is the complicated relationship between parts and the whole. Weitzman also examines the bond that unites the two mirrors, unravelling the causal relationship between the influence the Devil's mirror has on Kay and the perfection and importance he sees in the Snow Queen's realm and the things associated with her (1108). Weitzman points out that Kay's irony never extends to rationality and logic, the things that he esteems the highest. The Snow Queen's mirror remains solid and whole even though it is cracked into thousand pieces, all perfectly like one another. The Devil's mirror, as explained earlier, causes more harm in small pieces, for each piece contains the properties of the whole mirror. The two mirrors are cracked in different ways: the shards of the Devil's mirror are scattered all over the world, while the Mirror of Reason remains in one piece and maintains its form. Truth-seeking is an important element throughout the story, although it is not discussed openly apart from Kay's fruitless attempts to spell the word "eternity". Each mirror offers a solution to the fundamental question, presenting different ways to comprehend the surrounding reality. Compared to the Devil's mirror, the Mirror of Reason is by its very name all about rational thought and logic. The Mirror of Reason is not said to reflect anything, in fact: unlike the Devil's mirror, it does not provide knowledge about the physical world by viewing it in a certain way – it is turned inwards and only concerned with its own, inner truth encoded in absolute calculations, clauses, and concepts. While the Devil's mirror reaches towards the world and rejoices in its distortion, the Mirror of Reason acknowledges no truth beyond its pre-existing inferences. The outer reality is without meaning and beyond calculable verification.

Before moving on to Christian virtue and the tale's strong resentment of science, I would like to draw attention to the influence of the empiricist and rationalist worldviews with respect to the enchantment of fairy tales. "The Snow Queen" depicts talking animals and flowers, deeds of magic, flying sleds and spells – all very characteristic of a fairy-tale world. At the same time, empiricism and rationalism, the latter in particular, can be interpreted as forces that deprive the tale's world of marvel and fantastic wonder. As Terri Windling asks in a well-known essay, "Why, in our modern and rational world, do some of us still hunger for magic and marvels long beyond our childhood years – while others reject the fantastic with an absolutism bordering on fear?" (33). This is what briefly happens to Kay, who is immersed in the realm of scientific reasoning and ceases to see the marvels of the world, replacing their fantastic allure with scientific explanations: the fantastic is dethroned by reason. The rationalising approach to fairy tales and fantasy can, at least coming from outside (that is, from readers or interpreters), be very corrosive: it is often associated with explaining the supernatural away. For example, Le Guin writes:

The tendency to explain fantasy by extracting the fantastic from it and replacing it with the comprehensible reduces the radically unreal to the secondhand commonplace .... Such rationalizations may be earnestly perceived as a defence of fantasy, but are in fact refusals of it, attempts to explain it away. (86)

The problem Le Guin highlights concerns approaches to fairy tales and fantasy; she asserts that children's books are particularly vulnerable to such

reductionism (86). In “The Snow Queen”, the (alleged) rationalisation and reduction of marvels happens within the tale’s world, creating a sense of self-corrosion: the fantastic wonder is threatened because some of the characters – Kay and the Snow Queen – choose to try to explain it and dismantle it into calculable pieces. The world of fairy tales is questioned from within – or so it would seem. The compatibility of different worldviews is one of the most intriguing philosophical problems within the tale, and here I would emphasise that explanations do not inevitably lead to reduction: Kay’s desire to understand and study the marvels, to solve the mysteries of the world, does not have to mean that the marvels cease to exist. A world that allows fantastic marvels does not have to exclude scientific curiosity, and vice versa. They may coexist; there is much greater friction between scientific and Christian worldviews than between empiricism and rationalism, as discussed in the next section.

### **3. Christian Faith and Condemnation of Science: Viewing Reason as a Vice**

Empiricism and rationalism, in spite of offering two very different means of making sense of the world, coexist relatively harmoniously within the tale. The third contestant, Christian faith, brings with it severe problems, and what remains after the rejection of science is belief without justification. What I argue in this section is that empiricism and rationalism now both represent scientific worldviews in general, and are attacked by a Christianity that is not only restricted to the domain of the church but intersects all spheres of human life, determining an entire system of perceiving reality. This attack against science is based on ethical assumptions that the tale itself proves erroneous, and the logical stumbling block is revealed by the Devil’s mirror.

The very history of fairy tales as an important part of ancient cultures enhances the relevance of studying tales in a worldview context: tales were, in spite of their magical, supernatural, and miraculous nature, included in belief systems in a manner not so different from modern day beliefs in religions or non-existing phenomena (see, for instance, Zipes 2). No wonder, then, that religions, tales, and myths are often discussed side by side; it is typical for fantasy and fairy tales to extract themes and motifs from various mythologies, and in this respect, Christian mythology is not an exception. Attebery’s *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* explores the many ways in which fantasy, fairy tales, and myths are intertwined. According to Attebery, it is surprising that Christian fantasy exists at all: the possible risks of such writings include being accused of trivialising religion by presenting its themes as entertainment and, on the other hand, representing religion in a manner that collides with the canonised interpretations. In spite of these risks, many writers of fantasy, with Attebery focusing on C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald, have incorporated obvious Christian themes, motifs, and symbols in their writing. Their work, Attebery writes, shows that it is possible for fantasy to work as a theological thought experiment (70). Given that this article is primarily concerned with different worldviews in “The Snow Queen”, Attebery’s understanding of *myth* is interesting: he calls myths any “collective story that encapsulates a world view and authorizes belief” (2). He also discusses Tolkien’s



view that if the “Christian story resembles other myths, it was not because all are lies but because a great truth is gradually revealing itself” (74).

Taking these remarks into account, the idea of the worldview is in many ways a relevant and fruitful perspective from which to approach fantasy, fairy tales, and myths alike. Many of Andersen’s fairy tales comment on Christian myths either openly or implicitly: “The Little Match Girl” and “The Little Mermaid”, for instance, discuss the immortal soul, the church, God, and heaven. “The Snow Queen”, while it can be treated as an instance of the truth-seeking and revealing stories Tolkien and Attebery discuss, leans heavily and openly on the grand myth of Christianity. The reading I present in this section is kin to Jørgen Johansen’s interpretation of “The Little Mermaid” (“Den lille Havfrue”). Johansen examines the topographical cues given in the tale, focusing on the oppositions between high and low, culture and nature, and also the more fundamental division between heaven and earth. In Johansen’s reading, the realm of the mermaids – that is, the bottom of the sea – and the town on the mainland mirror one another in many ways. This includes similarities as well as opposites: both in the town and in the mermaid’s realm social life is centred around a castle, but the town’s church has its antagonistic counterpart in the sea-witch’s lair, the opposition in “The Little Mermaid” is thus between religion and witchcraft (203–05); in contrast, in “The Snow Queen” it is between religion and science.

While Kay becomes immersed in scientific inquiry and observations, his change is contrasted by Gerda’s utter trust in God and the force of love and virtue. In Andersen’s tale, belief without justification, the favourable alternative to the more scientific worldviews, is in every way connected to Christianity: “The Snow Queen” is deeply concerned with the core motif of a child’s innocent faith, embodied by Gerda. Gerda’s character and nature are dominantly defined by unfaltering faith, loyalty, selflessness, and perseverance. She is compassionate and caring, compared to the Snow Queen’s amoral indifference (discussed in more detail below). Gerda’s faith never fails her: prayers literally shield her against enemies as she arrives at the Snow Queen’s palace and finds it guarded by monstrous, giant snowflakes:

Da bad den lille Gerda sit fadervor, og kulden var så stærk, at hun kunne se sin egen ånde, som en hel røg stod den hende ud af munden. Ånden blev tættere og tættere, og den formede sig til små, klare engle, der voksede mere og mere, når de rørte ved jorden. Og alle havde hjelm på hovedet og spyd og skjolde i hænderne. De blev flere og flere, og da Gerda havde endt sit fadervor, var der en hel legion om hende, de huggede med deres spyd på de gruelige snefnug, så de sprang i hundrede stykker, og den lille Gerda gik ganske sikker og frejdig frem. (“Snedronningen” 234)<sup>5</sup>

Gerda’s prayers transform into guarding angels, allowing her to access the palace – ironically, it is the threatening cold itself that allows the angels to

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<sup>5</sup> “It was so cold that, as little Gerda said the Lord’s Prayer, she could see her breath freezing in front of her mouth, like a cloud of smoke. It grew thicker and thicker, and took the shape of little angels that grew bigger and bigger the moment they touched the ground. All of them had helmets on their heads and they carried shields and lances in their hands. Rank upon rank, they increased, and when Gerda had finished her prayer she was surrounded by a legion of angels. They struck the dread snowflakes with their lances and shivered them into a thousand pieces. Little Gerda walked on, unmolested and cheerful” (“Snow Queen” 56).

become physical, perceptible beings. The angels defy the snowflakes, and Gerda seemingly defies the Snow Queen even though she is physically absent at her arrival. This opposition is in my opinion artificial, and at the core of the tale's main ethical issue is the unquestioned assumption that the Snow Queen is evil. This notion is implied in the tale in several ways, and I want to emphasise that these misinterpretations – that is, the moral estimations either implied and embedded in the story or uttered out loud by various characters – are presented *within* the tale itself. This perspective is common in scholarly interpretations, too: Schanoes, for instance, calls the Snow Queen wicked in the previously cited passage without presenting any reasoning or proof to support this assumption (5). At the very beginning of the tale the general attitude towards the Snow Queen is revealed in the reactions and remarks of other characters: when the grandmother tells Kay and Gerda about the Snow Queen, Gerda's initial reaction is fear – she wonders whether the Snow Queen would be able to enter the house. Kay's attitude is defiant: “Lad hende kun komme,’ sagde drengen, ‘så sætter jeg hende på den varme kakkelovn, og så smelter hun” (“Snedronningen” 193).<sup>6</sup> One of the children expresses fear while the other expresses aggression and resistance; both perceive the Snow Queen as someone who must be either avoided or confronted.

Similar, fearful attitudes frequently arise in the course of the tale, not least because the Snow Queen is for obvious reasons associated with winter, the time of struggle and death for many of the anthropomorphic animals of the story. In the fifth section Gerda learns about Kay's situation from pigeons<sup>7</sup> who tell her that the Snow Queen blew at them and all the young ones died except for them (“Snedronningen” 226). This attitude already implies the chief misinterpretation: applying moral rules and estimations to something beyond their extent – natural phenomena are amoral, ethically indifferent, despite the fact that the Snow Queen can be seen as the personification of winter. Amorality, in the sense that Dorsey, for instance, uses the term, refers to actions that are “neither permissible nor impermissible, they neither violate one's duty nor conform to it, they are neither morally better nor morally worse than any other action” (330) – in other words, amoral actions completely lack any moral evaluative status. It is crucial to not to confuse amorality with immorality: immorality opposes morality (see, for instance, Baofu 4), while amorality is neutral. One of the varieties of morality and immorality that Peter Baofu introduces includes divisions into good and bad and into good and evil (5–6); the latter in particular is a dichotomy much explored in worlds of fairy tales and fantasy. The view adopted in *The Snow Queen* much foregrounds the good-and-evil dichotomy; however, I intend to show that the very logic of the tale suggests that the Snow Queen and the scientific worldview she represents are amoral, not immoral, in spite of the interpretation that emerges from within a Christian framework.

The Snow Queen is easily viewed as the villain of the tale, but in fact the logical ground rules set out in the story lead to very different interpretations.

<sup>6</sup> “Well, let her come!” cried the boy. “I would put her on the hot stove and melt her” (“Snow Queen” 10).

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that it is the pigeon, “skovdue”, that is chosen as the winter's victim: pigeons are akin to doves, and the connection further emphasises the threat the Snow Queen allegedly poses to the Christian religion.

These logical constraints have their origin in the Devil's mirror and its ability to distort perception. This significant detail can best be approached by following Kay's relationship with the Snow Queen. The reader first meets her with Kay, who sees her on a wintry night through a window as she transforms from a giant snowflake into a beautiful woman:

Snefnugget voksede og voksede, det blev til sidst til en hel dame, klædt i det fineste hvide flor, der var som sammensat af millioner stjerneagtige fnug. Hun var så smuk og fin, men af is, den blændende, blinkende is, dog var hun levende; øjnene stirrede som to klare stjerner, men der var ingen ro eller hvile i dem. ("Snedronningen" 193)<sup>8</sup>

The encounter happens before the glass fragment finds its way to Kay's eye, and presumably he sees the Snow Queen as she is: a beautiful but cold woman with a restless look in her eyes. Later, when the paths of the two characters cross again, Kay is already under the influence of the Devil's mirror – however, the way he perceives the Snow Queen does not change. Importantly, in both scenes the events are witnessed from Kay's perspective. While Kay's perception is distorted regarding everything else, the Snow Queen remains the same in his eyes – the only change is that the woman no longer seems to be made of ice ("Snedronningen" 199). This slight difference has more to do with the kiss she gives Kay than the presence of the mirror shards in his eye and heart, for her kisses make him oblivious to the cold. What needs to be examined more closely is the effect of the mirror's work on the Snow Queen's character.

I see two possible interpretations, although I find only one of them properly able to explain both the workings of the mirror and the moral position of the Snow Queen. One possibility would be to argue that the logic of the tale fails in this particular instance: the conditions set for the distorting powers of the mirror cease to apply for some unexplained reason. If this interpretation is adopted, the result would be to treat the problem as a mere flaw in the reasoning of the tale, similar to that of Cinderella's glass shoe that does not disappear at midnight alongside the other enchanted things, despite the condition set by the fairy godmother. This explanation, while possible, is in my opinion insufficient. Instead, I am proposing a reading that allows the mirror's logic to remain intact and provides more depth to the moral issues and the character of the Snow Queen.

Perceiving the Snow Queen as a proper villain, as Gerda and the anthropomorphic animals tend to do, is incompatible with what is said about the mirror. If the mirror's logic is accepted, the Snow Queen has to be amoral or ambivalent: the mirror's workings are based on dichotomies of good and bad, fair and foul, moral and immoral, but the Snow Queen cannot wholly be either. The nature of the mirror becomes increasingly complicated when the moral aspect is scrutinised more closely: it is the Danish word *godt* that is noteworthy here. It is stated that all good and beautiful, *alt godt og smukt*, fades away. This implies that the mirror is also able to reflect and distort aspects beyond the

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<sup>8</sup> "This flake grew bigger and bigger, until at last it turned into a woman, who was dressed in the finest white gauze which looked as if it had been made from millions of star-shaped flakes. She was beautiful and she was graceful, but she was ice-shining, glittering ice. She was alive, for all that, and her eyes sparkled like two bright stars, but in them there was neither rest nor peace" ("Snow Queen" 10–11).

solely visual. The correspondence between the outside and the inside of the Snow Queen's morality is an unresolved problem. The word *godt* encourages an interpretation according to which the mirror can pervert moral and other inner traits as well as mere physical looks – if not, the reading could soon take the well-trodden path that leads to making assumptions about fictional characters based on their outer appearance. In this case, the Snow Queen would probably be treated as a treacherous, siren-like enchantress, a reading I find rather disappointing. On the other hand, if the mirror is indeed able to detect inner characteristics as well as physical ones, the hypothesis of the Snow Queen's amorality stands.

The Snow Queen's moral indifference and her associations with science have also been acknowledged by Jennifer Miller, who parallels C. S. Lewis's White Witch with Andersen's Snow Queen and studies the sexual themes in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Miller's analysis and her comparative approach are an excellent example of how fantasy and fairy tales often influence one another and draw ingredients from common soil. Miller, comparing the two characters, writes that the "Snow Queen is symbolic of reason and intellect in a way that the White Witch never is," and she continues her analysis by making an important observation about evil: "While the White Witch is cruel for the sake of being cruel, the Snow Queen is simply dispassionate and rational" (121). Miller's remark brings to the fore the Snow Queen's impartial and unengaging nature, and in doing so implies her position as an amoral character instead of an immoral one. According to Miller, one of the most obvious differences between the White Witch and the Snow Queen is that the former is killed at the end of the story while the latter is not; in fact, she is entirely absent at the climax of the tale – she is never destroyed (121).

Given the strong juxtapositions woven in the tale, the Snow Queen's alleged villainy time after time comes back to a few key factors: reason, science, and logic. The Snow Queen, her palace, and her winter are continuously associated with scientific and mathematical accuracy (as discussed in the analysis of the Mirror of Reason in the previous section of this paper). Her palace is illuminated by regular aurorae: "Nordlysene blussede så nøjagtigt, at man kunne tælle til, når de var på det højeste, og når de var på det laveste" ("Snedronningen" 236).<sup>9</sup> Kay develops an interest in these things after coming under the influence of the mirror shards: his games turn into more sensible ones; he values flower-formed snowflakes over real roses because of their perfect shape. Instead of looking, Kay begins to observe, and mathematical regularity now pleases him. The inclination of both Kay and the Snow Queen towards science and reason evokes significant ethical questions: science, although permanently unable to fully achieve its aim, strives for objectivity, neutrality, and independence. If the Snow Queen is seen as the representative of reason, rationality, and scientific curiosity, as she is in my reading, she would not *have* to be defined as moral or immoral – mere impartiality would suffice. The moral problems in the Snow Queen's character are intertwined with the tension between moral right and scientific right, the different conditions and modes of evaluation. In this case the criticism of both Kay's changed character and the character of the Snow Queen would be explained by their willingness to

<sup>9</sup> "The Northern Lights flared with such regularity that you could time exactly when they would be at the highest and lowest" ("Snow Queen" 58).

focus on *right* as in correct, not *right* as in moral or virtuous. Yet even this tendency would not be justification enough to claim that the Snow Queen is immoral, or, using fairy-tale vocabulary, evil: logical premises, calculations, and scientific reasoning are either correct or incorrect and, as such, outside of moral evaluation. It therefore seems unreasonable to use them as a basis for ethical condemnation.

Seeking answers with the help of science is not encouraged in the tale; indeed, it is viewed as perilous: Weitzman, for instance, characterises Kay's desire for absolute knowledge as fatal (1117–18). Finally, it should be asked why reason is disapproved even more than empiricism if science as a whole is to be scorned: the Snow Queen is primarily associated with rationalism, which is presented as the greater of the two evils. The answer can be found in the different endeavours and objects of the two branches, particularly the different opinions about what knowledge concerns: according to Alan Nelson, for rationalists the “corresponding objects of knowledge are then non-sensory, general, and unchanging or eternal” (27). The objects of rationalist knowledge are closer to the truths of Christianity, and thus a greater threat: the eternal, unchanging, and abstract otherworldly realm is the one with which religion is often concerned, as evident in Kay's impossible task to form the word *evigheden* (“eternity”) from ice shards:

Kay gik også og lagde figurer, de allerkunstigste, det var forstandsispillet. For hans øjne var figurerne ganske udmærkede og af den allestørste vigtighed; det gjorde det glaskorn, der sad ham i øjet! Han lagde hele figurer, der var et skrevet ord, men aldrig kunne han finde på at lægge det ord, som han just ville, det ord: evigheden, og snedronningen havde sagt: “Kan du udfinde mig den figur, så skal du være din egen herre, og jeg forærer dig hele verden og et par nye skøjter.” Men han kunne ikke. (“Snedronningen” 236)<sup>10</sup>

The word “eternity” cannot be formed in the game of ice-cold reason, but Gerda's unflinching, solid faith is all that is required to complete the task. Rationalism and reason are viewed as a vice primarily because they venture the questions that are, in the ethos of the tale, reserved solely for religion to resolve – despite the fact that the Mirror of Reason and the Snow Queen herself are amoral.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article began by questioning why Andersen's deep and complex fairy tale had evoked so few philosophical readings. As this paper hopefully has shown, “The Snow Queen” embodies several philosophical issues, both epistemic and ethical, and its treatment of different worldviews is intelligent and thought-provoking. It is very understandable that the scholarship of fantasy and fairy

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<sup>10</sup> “Kay was cleverly arranging his pieces in the game of ice-cold reason. To him the patterns were highly remarkable and of the utmost importance, for the chip of glass in his eye made him see them that way. He arranged his pieces to spell out many words; but he could never find the way to make the one word he was so eager to form. The word was ‘Eternity.’ The Snow Queen had said to him, ‘If you can puzzle that out you shall be your own master, and I’ll give you the whole world and a new pair of skates.’ But he could not puzzle it out” (“Snow Queen” 58–59).

tales often focuses on questions of worlds and worldbuilding, but nonetheless there is need for further collaboration between the two disciplines. As this article argues, fairy tales, such as “The Snow Queen” par excellence, can discuss questions of worldview in remarkable depth, contributing to the fields of literature and philosophy alike. One of the most intriguing issues “The Snow Queen” addresses is the compatibility of different worldviews and the intersecting conflicts and frictions between them. While empiricism and rationalism are presented as different but harmoniously coexisting worldviews that are not mutually exclusive, the contest between science and Christian doctrine is much more drastic. From the Christian point of view, both empiricism and rationalism, the former represented by the Devil’s mirror, the latter by the Snow Queen’s Mirror of Reason, are viewed as inadequate, unreliable, and unable to provide either knowledge about the world or profound truth.

Regarding fantasy and the sense of marvel and wonder so characteristic of fairy tales, the rationalising forces appear to threaten these, too. The gravest logical fallacy the tale succumbs to, as argued, is viewing the Snow Queen and the scientific worldview she represents, as villainous. There is, however, another fallacy, if smaller: the fantastic and the marvellous do not in fact diminish and flee before rationalism and science. Kay’s interest and appreciation remain, only their form and emphasis are different. He is still intrigued by the mysteries, but alongside wonder is now determination to solve them. In the end it is Christianity that appears to be incompatible with differing views; science, on the other hand, does not necessarily lead to the reduction of fantastic wonder – there is room for fantasy and philosophy, both in the tale and in the studies written about it.

*Biography:* Katariina Kärkelä is a doctoral student of Comparative Literature at Tampere University, Finland. Her primary interests include philosophical literature and literary philosophy, and in her dissertation she analyses J.R.R. Tolkien’s legendarium as a epistemic system. The epistemic peculiarities of fictional worlds and the possibility of supernatural knowledge are the main interest in her study the purpose of which is to find out the ways fantasy literature pushes the boundaries of knowledge by treating supernatural phenomena such as dream visions and prophecies as genuine, reliable sources of information. Plato’s literary philosophy and medieval dream vision theories form the theoretical core of her current work.

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