Magic

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The concept of magic originates in the Greek *magos* and related *mageia*, a cognate of the Persian *magus*, used to refer to a member of the priestly caste. In anthropology and related disciplines, there have been numerous attempts at definitions but no general consensus has been found. One recent definition stipulates, "magic is about changing the state or essence of persons, objects, acts and events through certain special and non-trivial kinds of actions with opaque causal mediation" (Sørensen 2007, 32). The difficulty in arriving at a generally accepted definition reflects the heterogeneity of the practices, beliefs, and modes of thinking referred to. For instance, magic is used to designate present-day university students' practice of bringing a lucky charm to exams; inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands' spells and rituals aimed at securing an abundant harvest; and second-century Greek males' attempts to ensure the lasting devotion of a particular woman by inscribing a formula on a lead tablet before burying it in the ground. It is not immediately clear what is common to these diverse cases. Moreover, the concept of magic seems to include references to particular types of (ritual) behavior, to certain beliefs, and to specific modes of thinking.

The relation of magic to neighboring and contrasting concepts such as superstition, ritual, religion, and science also remains contested. Tracing its descent to antiquity, magic has a history as a polemical concept in the Western world designating diverse forms of outgroup or unconventional religious practices with a focus on efficacy—that is, the ability of the procedure to change certain aspects of reality. For instance, *magi* referred to allegedly powerful foreign priests in antiquity and protestant polemicists designated the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as magical. This polemical history has led to a strong critique of the concept's theoretical utility with the most fervent critics calling for its abandonment from scholarly discourse. It is argued that magic as a concept is a product of a particular Western historical tradition and that this makes it unsuitable for describing practices outside its original historical and cultural scope. Magic can thus be included with other broad concepts such as religion and ritual that are criticized as biased and deeply compromised. Following more than two decades of criticism, however, it remains unclear what is gained from such terminological exorcism. An alternative strategy acknowledges that such broad concepts are not explanatory but broad categories that include a conglomerate of features, each of which can and ought to be explained separately before any meaningful synthesis can be attempted. Individual features subsumed under the concept of magic need to be isolated in order to arrive at adequate explanatory theories.

Anthropological approaches

"Magic" became a natural part of the conceptual toolkit of anthropology and history of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Three approaches can be discerned. Victorian intellectualists, such as Edward Burnett Tylor and James G. Frazer, explained magic within an evolutionist paradigm, specifying it as a mode of thinking characterizing so-called primitive societies. Most notably Frazer (1911) defined sympathetic magic as the process by which practitioners attempted to control their environment at a distance by means of invisible connections. Frazer identified two processes of thought underlying this practice and thus two basic forms of magic: imitative and contagious magic. Epitomized by the practice of harming an enemy through the manipulation of an effigy, imitative magic builds on relations of similarity. Contagious magic, on the other hand, builds up representations of an unbroken connection between things formerly united, as when nail clippings or a piece of clothing can be used to influence its former owner. Inspired by empiricist philosophy, Frazer identified the mental mechanisms underlying magic as associations of ideas misapplied by the childish mind as having automatic effect on the world. According to Frazer, magic is not only a mistaken practice; it is also the "bastard sister of science" as it, in contrast to religion, implies that impersonal laws, rather than the intentions of spirits or gods, govern the world. Following decades of criticism, a neointellectualist position arose in the late 1960s arguing that magic and religion, like science, should be seen as rational, but flawed, attempts to explain and control the environment.

In contrast to the British evolutionists, the French sociological school instigated what became an essentially symbolist account of magic. Arguing that religion is the central force in the emergence of society, magic is thought to be the more or less illicit exploitation of society's derived force, *mana*. Magic is thus the symbolic expression of the wishes of an often antisocial and personal nature. Pointing out that not all potential sympathetic connections are used in any magical system, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert (Mauss 1972) emphasized the central role of cultural classificatory systems and derived cultural schemas in establishing these connections. Magic further exploits the borders of classificatory systems—for instance, designating old widows, people with disabilities, dwarves, and other persons perceived as being at the fringes of society as bearers of *mana* and thus as eligible magicians. Mauss and Hubert emphasized the role of ritual as the traditional practice able to change the world and thus central to magic. Émile Durkheim (1995) also distinguished between religion and magic based on their social functions. Functioning as the symbolic expression of a common moral and classificatory system uniting a group in a congregation, religion is essentially prosocial and contrasts with the egotistic and private goals found in magic, based on a clientalist relation between a magician and his or her client. Magic was once again seen as the illicit and essentially antisocial exploitation of the social power, *mana*, that finds its prosocial expression in religion.

Functional and symbolist understandings of magic have had a profound influence in anthropology and neighboring disciplines. For instance, in his influential study on the Azande, Evans-Pritchard (1937) described how magic functions as a punitive device forming part of a local, conceptual system including oracles and witchcraft. More

recently, Michael Taussig (1993) has addressed how the classificatory "other" is imbued with magical power in a modern colonial context. However, the symbolist and functional approach also paved the way for the call to abandon the term "magic." If magic only designates what some social group polemically designates as illicit and egoistic ritual practice, it becomes difficult to uphold magic as an objective conceptual category.

The third approach followed naturally from the emergence of fieldwork as the standard in anthropology. In contrast to the British evolutionists and the French sociologists, who analyzed magic with an epistemological framework defending an empiricist and a neo-Kantian approach respectively, this new breed of anthropologists took a more pragmatic approach. Most notably, Bronisław Malinowski (1948) argued that magic, religion, and science could be distinguished, not as abstract epistemological principles of thought, but by their local and pragmatic embedding. Whereas science designates the local mastery of the environment by means of technology, and religion functions to express and harness emotions related to major life transitions and crisis, the main function of magic is to instill a sense of security in instrumental actions imbued with uncertainty. Actions involving high immediate risks (e.g., deep-sea shark fishing) or lack of control due to their complexity (e.g., growing yams) inevitably produce a state of anxiety in the performer—a state calmed by the performance of magical rituals instilling a sense of control. Magic may even therefore have a beneficial effect as it potentially improves the performance of the agent by lowering levels of anxiety. Anticipating aspects of speech act theory, Malinowski also pointed to the important role of unintelligible or esoteric language in magical rituals. Accordingly, its relative meaninglessness and strangeness give rise to representations of direct efficacy on the world in contrast to the pragmatic efficacy of ordinary language. This line of inquiry was further developed in the works of Stanley Tambiah (1968). Rejecting the position that the power of magical words stems from a conflation of language and world, the so-called denotative fallacy, Tambiah argued that words gain their power through metaphorical and metonymic extension as well as through their relation to the concrete actions performed in the ritual.

The three approaches all accentuate important aspects of magic that any modern theory needs to address. Intellectualists point to specific modes of thinking underlying magic. The symbolists emphasize the importance of local classificatory systems and of ritual as a specific type of human behavior. Finally, the pragmatists highlight how magical rituals are embedded in a local pragmatic context with particular types of concerns and employing specific performative styles.

Psychology

Psychology also showed an early interest in magic and the related term "superstition." Prompted by the occult revival of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western world, early psychologists sought to determine to what extent magical and religious phenomena were true and efficacious and thus took full part in the science/religion debate that flourished at the time. For instance, one of the founders of modern psychology, William James, was a member of the Society for Psychic Research that investigated

the alleged truth of occult claims made by spiritists and theosophists. At the same time, Danish psychologist Alfred Lehmann pioneered experimental approaches to magic and superstition. He argued that magical phenomena should be explained as illusory effects produced by the relation between perception, attention, expectation, and memory on the one hand, and manipulation and sleight of hand on the other. Whereas the tradition following James focused on religious experience as the central focus relegating magic to the fringes, Lehmann initiated experimental investigations into the psychological principles underlying magical beliefs. Psychological approaches have since focused on two related questions: First, are some individuals more inclined to "magical thinking"? Second, what features characterize magical beliefs, thinking, and actions and how do they relate to pragmatic situations?

In line with early anthropology's prevalent comparison between so-called primitive people and children, a number of psychologists understood magic as a remnant of more primitive thinking still found in the mind of the child—a propensity that would be eradicated by proper education and cognitive growth. Freud understood magic as an expression of the child's infantile experience of omnipotence of thought. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget claimed that magical thinking was a natural part of the child's preoperational stage, later to be supplanted by logical thinking. Distinguishing between processes of thinking underlying magic and explicitly held magical beliefs, recent research has challenged the proposed association between magic and particular developmental stages. When investigated systematically, children are no more prone to magical thinking than adults; nor do they hold more magical beliefs, even though these have different content.

Correlations between magical beliefs and other demographic factors such as gender, occupation, education, and socioeconomic situation have been investigated without any clear patterns emerging. Whereas the content of the beliefs in some studies correlates with particular demographic patterns, neither the quantity nor the underlying cognitive processes seems to differ systematically. Further, correlations between magical beliefs and certain personality traits, such as conservatism, suggestibility, and locus of control, as well as particular mental illnesses, such as obsessive compulsive disorder and schizophrenia, have been found. However, the effects are weak and most studies are conducted on student populations in Western countries putting into question their wider applicability.

Another line of research investigates general cognitive operations believed to underlie magic and how these relate to particular situational constraints. Inspired by dual-processing accounts in cognitive science, which claim the existence of a host of intuitive heuristic processes besides more consciously accessible rational thinking, mental processes involved in magical thinking have been identified. For instance, Paul Rozin and colleagues (e.g., Nemeroff and Rozin 2000) found principles of sympathetic magic guiding behavior among American college students when making forced choice decisions with limited knowledge. Frazer's laws of similarity and contagion are thus argued to be the outward expression of mental processes activated in situations lacking strong causation. In line with this, Eugene Subbotsky (2010) defends a "fundamentality hypothesis" according to which magical thinking is not just a relic of the past but the intuitive bedrock on which, later, more rationalistic thinking develops.

Cognitive approaches

Inspired by recent advances in the cognitive science of religion, a number of scholars have attempted to integrate findings from psychology with ethnographic and historical studies of magic in real-world settings. Thus Illka Pyysiäinen (2004) argues that magic can be distinguished from religion by the causal direction involved in the action. Whereas religion aims to produce supernatural effects by means of natural actions (e.g., cleansing a child's head to produce a new supernatural status), magic aims to produce concrete natural effects by means of supernatural causes (e.g., ensuring a good crop by supernatural means). This opens magic to empirical refutation (e.g., if the harvest fails) in contrast to the empirical nonfalsifiability of supernatural effects found in religion. Taking cognitive linguistics as his point of departure, Jesper Sørensen (2007) has argued that magic is built on an ordinary mental procedure of conceptual blending, by which distinct cognitive domains are fused and thereby represented as able to influence each other. What distinguishes magic from other expressions of this mental process are the representations of concrete efficacy effected by ritual behavior, as well as the embedding of magical rituals into representations guiding ordinary instrumental behavior. Magic is never represented as the sole cause but rather as one among several factors contributing to any given result. This immunizes magical actions from easy falsification and also allows for pragmatic failure to be represented as caused by malignant forces.

In order to advance research into the heterogeneous phenomena underlying magic, future research will need to further isolate and specify the mental processes underlying magical thinking and action as well as to designate how these relate to particular pragmatic domains of social interaction.

SEE ALSO: Addiction; Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline; Buddhism; Cognition, Causal; Durkheim, Émile (1858–1917); *Elementary Forms of Religious Life, The / Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*; Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1902–73); Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939); Malinowski, Bronisław (1884–1942); Mauss, Marcel (1872–1950); Modernity; New Age, Wicca, and Paganism; Pilgrimage; Ramos, Arthur (1903–49); Rationality and Belief; Religion and Cognition; Religion, Health, and Wellbeing; Religion and Science; Religion, Symbolist versus Intellectualist Approaches to; Ritual; Ritual and Cognition; Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI); Technology; Totemism; Tylor, Edward (1832–1917); Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic

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