

Magic Notes

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Magic linked to Astrology

'Nature worked on man and, by magic, men could take action in return and alter their destiny. So they assiduously visited diviners, magi and astrologers in order to lift curses, know their future or read their horoscope'.¹

Leading theorists:

Frazer, Malinowski, Mircea Eliade, Emile Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard (both symbolists) and Levi-Strauss.

From previous classes:

Culture: Tylor regarded magic as a primitive way of explaining the world.

Enchantment: concrete magic, which one experiences when enchanted, may be distinguished from instrumental magic – i.e. magic as an instrument of control of the environment.

Definitions

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, for example, gives a standard view, defining it as 'the pretended art of influencing [the] course of events by occult control of nature or of spirits, witchcraft'. That word 'pretended' is crucial to the whole debate. In other words magicians are charlatans, magic doesn't work and the only true form of the art is that which overtly depends on trickery and illusion - modern stage magic.

However, for most of its history, until the modern period, there was no doubt that magic worked. Here's another definition, this time from the web:

The practice of using charms, spells, or rituals to attempt to control natural or chance events or to influence the behavior or emotions of others
(<http://www.answers.com/topic/folk-religion>)

And from the twentieth century esoteric philosopher, P.D. Ouspensky we find the following:

Magic, in the usual understanding of this word, means the capacity to accomplish what cannot be accomplished by ordinary physical means. Such would be, for example, the power to influence psychically people and objects at a distance, to see people's actions and to know their thoughts, to make them disappear from our world and appear in unexpected places; the capacity to change one's appearance and even one's physical nature, to transfer oneself in some inconceivable way to great distances, to pass through walls, etc.²

¹ Lançon, Bertrand, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, p. 96.

² Ouspensky, P.D., *A New Model of the Universe*, London, Arkana 1984 [1931], p. 110.

Emile Durkheim

The sociologist Emile Durkheim acknowledge the similarities between magical and religious practice:

Magic, too, is made up of beliefs and rites. Like religion, it has its own myths and dogmas, but these are less well developed, probably because, given its pursuit of technical and utilitarian ends, magic does not waste time in pure speculation. Magic also has its ceremonies, sacrifices, purifications, prayers, songs and dances.³

However, he regarded the institutional hostility between the Christian church and independent magical practitioners

Must we therefore say that magic cannot be rigorously differentiated from religion – that magic is full of religion and religion full of magic and consequently, that it is impossible to separate them and define the one without the other? What makes this thesis hard to sustain is the marked repugnance of religion for magic and the hostility of magic to religion in return. Magic takes a kind of professional pleasure in profaning holy things, inverting religious ceremonies in its rites. On the other hand, while religion has not always condemned and prohibited magic rites, it has generally regarded them with disfavour.⁴

Durkheim's conclusion (p. 42; see also pp. 49-54) is structuralist and functionalist – i.e., he looks at magic and religion in terms of their organisational structures and functions.

Therefore:

- Religion requires the existence of a church with an organised priesthood and mass congregations, satisfying such needs as a desire for security.
- Magic is individualist: magicians work independently, performing practical services on behalf of individuals (*There is no Church of magic.*⁵).

Durkheim's work has been highly influential but the obvious critique, currently developed by Ronald Hutton, is that he has relied primarily on what he believes to be the structure of institutions and the function and intent of practice, rather than the respective

3 Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, New York: Free Press 1995 [1st edn., *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris; F. Alcan 1912], pp. 39-40.

4 Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, New York: Free Press 1995 [1st edn., *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris; F. Alcan 1912], pp. 40-1.

5 Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, New York: Free Press 1995 [1st edn., *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris; F. Alcan 1912], p. 41.

cosmologies and assumptions of magic and religion: can we really argue that the Catholic mass is not magical?

The following is adapted from an undergraduate history lecture at Bath Spa University

The mythology of modern science often presents science itself as a unique form of knowing the world which emerged in conflict with the magic world view, which was superstitious and ignorant. However, this view was challenged notably by Charles Webster at Oxford University.⁶ Webster argued that, in their attempt to control the world, magic and science possessed a huge amount in common. He then demonstrated how science emerged out of magic in the 16th and 17th centuries, rather than developed in revolt against it. Indeed, in the middle ages, magic was science in that, as a practical activity, it emerged directly out of prevailing physical beliefs about the nature of the universe.

There's another point to bear in mind about magic: that in a world in which the existence of God was taken for granted, and eternal salvation and the avoidance of damnation depended on loyalty to His law, magic was invariably seen as a means of growing closer to Him: nature could only be manipulated in accord with His wishes. This, at least, was how magic's protagonists and supporters saw it. Its opponents were free to disagree. But we need to understand that, from the point of view of its practitioners, magic was invariably sacred.

And in a world in which supernatural powers were taken for granted, there was nothing shocking, controversial or unusual in invoking their assistance in magical acts. Indeed to have denied the existence of such powers, including angels, would have been to have to deny the scripture and set oneself on a path to damnation. It was therefore perfectly logical to attempt to work with them.

The chief theological objection to such work was based on the grounds that magicians were setting themselves up as gods -or challenging God's sole right to control the universe.

However, we shouldn't imagine that, in attempting to control nature, magic was purely concerned with the external world, the 'out there'. In the NeoPlatonic tradition the entire universe was of divine origin and every person contained divine reason: nature, mind and the divine were all intertwined. Magic could therefore be intensely personal and a means of drawing closer to God, as much as a matter of using God's law to manipulate or control the natural or supernatural worlds:

⁶ Webster, Charles, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982.

As Frank Borchardt said, 'Among the magi around the year 1500, magic was an act of piety'.⁷

We should remember the word's root: the Magi were priests from northern Iran who were known for their skill as astrologers, which is why Mathew's Gospel has the Magi follow the star of Bethlehem to Christ's birthplace.

Types of Magic

Broadly speaking we can divided magic into two types. These should not be seen as mutually exclusive, although there are very useful categories.

1. Natural, or Sympathetic, Magic, required the harmonisation of the individual lifestyle with natural and super-natural forces, or the 'sympathies' (a term I'll explain below) between natural and super-natural objects and entities. One might do this through adjusting one's lifestyle, wearing appropriate colours or simple talismans (such as copper bracelets), eating certain foods, performing acts at auspicious times.

2. Ritual Magic required the use, quite simply of ritual. Whether we can identify the point at which the ordered harmonisation of one's life crosses into ritual is a moot point but, by the time the magician is uttering incantations, drawing sacred squares, conjuring up the dead or invoking angels he is quite clearly practicing ritual magic. Demonic magic, or the invocation of demons, is an aspect of ritual magic - which may be seen as a third form. One shouldn't necessarily imagine that it is Satanic or evil for demons could be good as much as bad. In the Platonic tradition one's 'daemon' is a sort of 'guardian angel', or, in modern New Age terms, perhaps a 'higher self'.

Natural magic is more obviously close in nature to modern science, being based on manipulation of the material world, but ritual magic can still be seen as a scientific activity if it was seen as a mode of inquiry designed to solicit information about the world.

We may also divide magic into two types based on the background of the practitioner.

1. **'High':** practiced by scholars, philosophers, requiring knowledge of theology, alchemy, astrology, Latin, Greek, Hebrew etc.
2. **Popular:** practiced by ordinary people as part of their everyday lives using folk remedies, traditional medicine and aspects of religious practice which had been adapted within a Christian context.

The history of the former is far better known than the latter, precisely because I'd also like to suggest two other ways of categorising magic:

⁷ Borchardt, Frank L., 'The Magus as Renaissance Man', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Spring 1990, Vol. 21 no 1, p. 73.

1. **Metaphysical** - primarily appealing beyond the natural and physical world to unseen forces or entities, whether by words, numbers or the invocation of spirits.
2. **Physical** - primarily using herbs or natural substances.

Lastly there's the conventional distinction between

White magic, designed to heal, provided benefits for others, bring the practitioner close to God

And

Black magic, designed to cause harm.

While we have ample evidence of the latter at certain periods in history - as in the many talismans containing curses which were thrown into the water at the Roman Baths in Bath - its association with Devil worship may be largely a medieval Christian construct.

The Philosophy and Mechanics of Magic

1. The Elements

The rational for medieval and Renaissance magic rests in the doctrine of 'Sympathy': that all natural objects have sympathy with all other objects to a greater or less extent. All objects are very sympathetic to some others, less so to others and hardly at all to the remainder. The principle of such sympathy is the theory of the four elements. This was Greek in origin but accepted without question in medieval and Renaissance Europe as the best explanation for the material world. According to this, the entire world was composed of four elements: fire, air, water and earth. Each of these was in a constant state of flux - what the sixth-century BCE Greek philosopher Heracleitus called the 'upward and downward path'. Each element constantly tried to find its natural place in the universe, which is why fire and air rise up and water and earth fall down. All natural objects - including people - are composed of a mixture of the four elements and so contain something in common. However, the theory is more intense and over-arching than the mere sharing of physical qualities suggests: if, as Neoplatonic cosmology suggests, the entire material world emanated out of the mind of God, the 'logos' or 'word' of John's Gospel, all material objects, even an insect or a bird, a tree or a stone, contain something divine. Such sympathies would be considered 'occult virtues'.

This theory can be traced to the ancient middle east of between three and four thousand years ago. It was definitely fully functioning in the Roman world. By the middle ages, the system had been codified to the extent that every single identifiable aspect of the natural or supernatural world from archangels to demons, stars and planets to plants, people, parts of the body, animals and diseases - indeed anything and everything - could be arranged in sequences of vertical and horizontal correspondences which we now know as the Great Chain of Being.

The magician works partly by manipulating these correspondences.

Such work could, of course, be combined with prayer or a direct appeal to God. And, if we should imagine that such work was uniquely 'magical', this was also precisely how physicians worked.

For example, in the treatment of the sick: if a patient had a fever, a hot dry complaint signified by Mars, the red - and hot and dry - planet, then the physician could administer herbs 'ruled' by Mars' opposite - such as Venus, a moist, wet planet. The physicians might therefore administer vervaine. He might also advise the patient to wear copper, cornelian or sapphire, wear white clothes or eat figs and perform special activities on Friday, the day ruled by Venus. The magician, rather than the physician, might also prepare Venusian talismans.

2. The power of words:

From the 11th/12 century onwards there were two main philosophical attitudes to the nature of language:

Realism: words are the same as the things they describe, therefore by speaking a word one invokes that thing. The logic is that ritual utterances have magical power.

Nominalism: words are arbitrary.

Talismans.

Talismans are the primary artefact produced by magicians. Simply, a talisman is an object constructed to embody the sympathies of relevant natural and supernatural beings or things, and so to benefit the user. Talismans are still used widely in India and makers and sellers of them can be found in modern Britain in the classified ads in a magazine such as *Prediction*.

A talisman would often be based around a planetary identity - as this would enable to maker to select the most auspicious moment - and so to embody the sympathies of the relevant time. A Venus talisman, designed to ward off a fever, or enhance a love affair (Venus was the Roman goddess of love) might be constructed from copper (Venus' metal) and engraved with Venusian symbols and numbers, all of which would be done when Venus was strong astrologically, but also at the Venus hour on Venus' day - after dawn on Friday. A solar talisman, meanwhile would be made out of gold (the sun's metal) after dawn on Sunday - Sun's-day.

Herbs

Along with herbs, the magician (or physician) would also administer herbs, each of which also formed part of the chain of being. The relationships were often quite straightforward. For example, soft, wet fruits could be lunar (the Moon ruled the tides and was associated with water), sharp, stingy plants were Martian (Mars ruled blood and hence knives - which shed blood) and bright, golden ones were solar - like the sun. Using this principle, melons were lunar, stinging nettles Martian and sunflowers solar. Some were regarded particularly important on account of their shape - such as the mandrake root - which had particularly powerful qualities.

Necromancy

The summoning of the dead - a very dangerous practice. John Dee (below) summoned angels, and was attacked for being a sorcerer.

Scrying

Scrying was the use of mirrors or bowls of water (as crystal balls). John Dee (see below) possessed a black polished stone of Aztec origin, which can be seen in the British Museum. The following extract from a fifteenth-century text describes how a mirror might be made and used.⁸

Have a mirror made of pure steel, measuring one palm around, with a handle for holding it, and have it bright and shiny like a sword. And have it made in the name of Floron, and around the rim of the mirror, on the part that is not polished, have these ten names [Latranoy, Iszarin, Bicol, Danmals, Gromon, Zara, Ralkal, Samah and Menglasar] inscribed with ten characters, with the same of the aforesaid spirit [Florin] written in the middle. After it has been made, it should be anointed with pure and bright balsam, and fumigated with aloes...and white frankincense.

When this has been done, the master of this work should sit and have this mirror held with both hands by a virgin boy before his chest. The master himself should be bathed and dressed in clean garments. Before he begins to exercise this work he should sprinkle in the air honey, milk and wine, mixed together in equal proportions, while saying : "O Floron, respond quickly in the mirror, as you are accustomed to appear."

When he has said this, he should read this conjuration before the mirror: "Bismille araathe mem lississa..."

When he has recited this conjuration, the master should look in the mirror, and he will see an armed knight seated on a horse, and his squire accompanying him. The knight will dismount from the horse and his squire will hold the horse. And then the master may ask him about past, present and future things, and he will at once give full response in writing."

History

The Greek and Roman magical tradition, mixed with Indian and Persian influence, entered medieval Europe primarily through a book known in Latin as the *Picatrix* and in Arabic as the *Ghayat al Hakim*, or the *Aim of the Wise*. Compiled by an anonymous author in Andalusia around 1000 CE, the *Picatrix* was translated into Latin in 1256 for the Castilian king Alfonso the Wise. It is an encyclopaedic work, considerably larger than most other medieval magical texts and deals at length with the rules for manipulating planetary forces.

(Web: <http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/picatrix.html>)

The text opens with an invocation to Allah:

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful, Praise be to Allah Whose guidance broke the darkness of ignorance; through His divine decree, miraculous events are created, and unto him all shall return.⁹

8 From Kieckhefer, Richard, *Forbidden Rites: a Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century*, 1997, pp. 104-5.

9 *Ghayat Al-Hakim. Picatrix: the Goal of the Wise*, trans Hashem Atallah, Seattle: Ouroboros Press 2002.

The essential philosophical position was that, as the sensible farmer works with the seasons, so the devout person works with God's law as expressed through the planets (which in the Platonic system were 'secondary causes'):

The cautious Soul collaborates with the Astral action just as the skilled peasant collaborates with Nature when ploughing and digging.

The following extract lists the roles of the planets.¹⁰

We have drawn out for you, disciple, from the same sources of the books of the People related to this matter so many things that if you think about it, you'll realize how difficult it was to gather them from all the books that stop on this subject and that are the basis of the thing.

Aphorisms from the *Secretum Secretorum*

Among them what Mercury the Babylonian says in his Aphorisms entitled Secret of Secrets, from which we have picked out 45, where we can find a lot of the knowledge in whose path we are in.

- (1) The content of the first one is that anyone who pretends to gather the powers of the stars is forced to assume their character.
- (2) The Sun should be asked for the raise of prestige, praising of fraternity, amplitude of designs, authority over the powerful, humiliation of the sovereigns, splendor of lights and vanishing of darkness.
- (3) The Moon should be asked for fluidity of movements, disclosure of secrets, abundance of waters, extinguishing of fires, invalidation of completed facts and dissolution of harmonic atmospheres.
- (4) Saturn should be asked for limitation of movements, hiding of secrets, impoverishment of countries, decrease of intentions, temptation of souls and water stagnation.
- (5) Jupiter should be asked for the accumulation of goods, conciliation of opinions, rejection of temptations, mitigation of grief and security of earthly and maritime paths.
- (6) Mars should be asked for promotion of animosity, boldness of spirit, taming of beasts, subordination of passions, splendor of lights, generation of insurrection and submission of enemies.

¹⁰ *Ghayat Al-Hakim* Book IV, Chapter 4, translated by Jose Manuel Redondo Ornelas, <http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/picatrix.html>

(7) Venus should be asked for harmonization of the souls, expansion of enjoyment, rejection of preoccupation, influx of desires, nobility of lineage, extinguishing of fire and domestication of animals.

(8) The Scribe should be asked for manifestation of the hidden, study of mysteries, unfastening of the tongue, circulation of wealth, defamation and transmission of slanders.

(9) Abundance of smoke, untarnished animosity, observance of feast, intensity in invocations, procure as possible; election of the correspondences and minutia in the petition: those are the milestones of talismans.

(10) If the objective is in the nature of the ruler the acquisition will be easier, and vice versa.

*** (11) Signs can degenerate the actions of the celestial bodies and neutralize their positions, but they can also improve them.

(12) If the ascendant sign is not from the same nature of the request or the requester, the invocation would be meaningless and; the requester beware!

(13) The talismans of fixed stars last longer than those of the planets.

The use of magic was eagerly debated by the leading theologians of the Middle Ages, including Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) and Thomas Aquinas (c.1223/5-7- 1274), two of the greatest. They both discussed the virtue and healing powers of stones, herbs and talismans.

Magic and Religion

Aquinas added a crucial argument that made such practices acceptable within a Christian context: that the physical body, with its weakness and desires, was subject to the influences of such 'occult virtues' but that the soul was not. As long as the soul, and therefore the ability to make moral choices and seek salvation, was responsible only to God, then Sympathetic or Natural magic (and therefore medicine) was acceptable within a Christian framework. Not all theologians agreed with this and the compromise certainly did extend to Ritual or demonic Magic.

The last great Renaissance magical text was the *Three books of Occult Philosophy* compiled by Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486 (?)-1535) in 1509/10.