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# The Meanings of Magic

## Mike Harding

**Abstract:** This paper explores at how the word 'magic' may be used, drawing mainly on the work of Wittgenstein. Beginning with his critique of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the attitudes of science, spirituality and psychotherapy towards magic and ritual and astrology are discussed, and a key passage in *The Tractatus* is used to challenge orthodox concepts of causality and explanation. The idea of 'real magic' as opposed to trickery is addressed via Heidegger's paper *On the Essence of Truth,* and the paper closes with a reflection on a current scientific suggestion that factors previously considered to be permanent might prove to be variable with time.

As I do not knowingly practice magic, and have not made a formal study of those claiming to be magicians, I will confine myself to looking at how the word *magic* might be used, and will draw mainly on the work of Wittgenstein, who had something of a way with words. So let's start with how it has been applied in the context of this conference.

In bringing us together, the organizers have generously created a broad church – or coven – which accords well with academic requirements to 'embrace diversity' and 'acknowledge difference'. In the call for papers, 'magic' was loosely defined as 'the attempt to engage with the world through the imagination or psyche, in order to obtain some form of knowledge, benefit or advantage. Celestial magic engages with the cosmos through stellar, planetary or celestial symbolism, influences or intelligences'. From this we can deduce that an understanding of magic may lie in the imagination or the psyche, which are then used to engage with the cosmos in various ways. Thus one has to ask, do scientists also use their imaginations to engage with cosmic forces in the search for knowledge and to gain advantage? Most theories that attempt to explain the fundamentals of our earthly existence are pinned to the geometry of the cosmos, and rest on the concomitant assumption that universal laws might be found there. To what extent are scientists doing something similar to what astrologers do, but from a different perspective? Might this throw light on why science tends to be so hostile towards astrology? No one put

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this hostility more clearly than the late John Maddox in his capacity as editor of *Nature*. In his editorial 'Defending Science Against Anti-Science' he asked, with reference to astrology:

> ... Would other professionals, lawyers or accountants say, be as tolerant of public belief that undermined the integrity of their work—and, potentially, their livelihood.[1]

Professional rivalry is admitted, although choosing lawyers and accountants as exemplars of probity might be further questioned. However, *Nature* now has a new editor, and has more recently published an intriguing paper which has more than a whiff of magic about it, and to which I will return at the close.

But first to Wittgenstein, who exhorts us to 'describe, not explain'.[2] He saw his philosophy as a form of therapy: we are to be cured of the confusions with which language endows us, and need to listen carefully to how it frames our perceptions. In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* he declares that 'Magic always rests on the idea of symbolism and of language',[3] and in language there is deposited 'a whole mythology'.[4] By this he means that the words we use are far from self-evident; they draw upon much that the speaker has not considered. He continues: 'Simple though it may sound, we can express the difference between science and magic if we say that in science there is progress, but not in magic. There is nothing in magic to show the direction of any development'.[5] By this I understand that magic has not *formally* developed over the centuries, as has science. Furthermore, Wittgenstein states, 'Frazer says it is very difficult to discover the error in magic and that this is why it persists for so long'.[6] Here attention is drawn to Frazer's claim that magic is essentially erroneous but Frazer can't identify *why*. It's odd to assert that an error exists if it can't be stated. Wittgenstein amplifies this with 'Frazer's account of the magic and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it

[1] John Maddox, 'Defending Science Against Anti-Science', *Nature* 368, no. 6468 (1994): p. 185.
[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 6.
[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, trans. A.C. Miles, ed. Rush Rhees (Norfolk: Brynmill, 1995), p. 4e.
[4] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, p. 10e.
[5] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, p. 13e.
[6] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, p. 2e.

makes these notions appear as mistakes... but none of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory'.[7]

For Wittgenstein, error lies in the manner in which we theorise our experience. Thus if people dance to create rain there is no error; only if they were to claim that the stamping of feet *caused* rain in some mechanical way would we have a reason to question that assertion. He is particularly harsh with Frazer's theories, which are

> '... much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves'.[8]

This raises an important point for all of us with regard to engaging with spiritual practices from an academic perspective. Wittgenstein did not *study* spirituality, he practiced it, and it is embedded in much of his philosophy.[9] While it is beyond the remit of this paper to elaborate more fully here, Monk's biography draws out one of Wittgenstein's essential concerns: that 'scientific' thinking bedevils the atheist and the orthodox theologian equally. Both seek a logical proof for God's existence, one in order to deny, the other for confirmation. Thus both commit the same error of seeking to engage with transcendent concepts while omitting to note the obvious: that what lies outside of human language cannot be captured from within it. Only faith remains. For as Wittgenstein put it, 'not <u>how</u> the world is, is mystical, but <u>that</u> it is'.[10] In short, Wittgenstein was talking about mysticism from personal experience. Frazer was not. Indeed, while Wittgenstein goes into some detailed criticism of the *Golden Bough*, he concludes that Frazer was someone 'who cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his stupidity and feebleness'.[11]

Perhaps not the most phenomenological of remarks, but it does remind us that when we attempt to infer what might be 'meant' by the actions of

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[7] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, p. 1e.
[8] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, p. 8e.
[9] Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 117, 410; Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 7–23.
[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921; New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2001), para. 6.44.
[11] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, p. 5e.

people from other cultures, or previous ages, we are simultaneously describing the attitudes of our own and seeing them though the lens of what makes sense to us. To some extent this is unavoidable, as clearly we can't make sense of what does not make sense to us, and the language we use inevitably sets up the manner in which we engage with the unfamiliar, as indeed happens when all attempts are made to explain something that lies outside our ken, including magic and the attempts of psychoanalysts to describe the complexities of mental life. What pictures do we draw on at such moments?

For example, from childhood Freud was fascinated by Egyptian artefacts and his language frequently draws on archaeological metaphors.[12] In his paper 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', Freud likened the search for the causes of mental distress to an archaeologist having to 'uncover what is buried, clear away the rubbish'.[13] Thus in each person there are assumed to be hidden memories, unconscious desires, latent thoughts, and so on which apparently follow a clear developmental sequence of psycho-sexual stages, much of which are repressed in a conjectured unconscious. This approach is more fully discussed in the paper 'A Mighty Metaphor: The Analogy of Archaeology and Psychoanalysis' by Donald Kuspit, in which the manner in which Freud's use of *hidden* (or occult) is employed.[14] While objects can be hidden, either deliberately or by the sands of time, *concepts* are another matter. However useful Freud's ideas might be he was, at the very least, mixing his metaphors or, as Wittgenstein describes (see below), confusing one language game with another. Freud did not 'discover' the unconscious. It is not a buried thing, but a theoretical model used to support his *interpretation* of everyday events. For Freud and his followers an interpretation magically transforms a thought or a desire into an object, the assumed roots of which needs to be explored and plundered for its treasures, much like Tutankhamen's tomb. For Wittgenstein, the suggestion that meanings are 'hidden' from the observer ultimately

[12] Elliott Oring, *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 87.

[13] Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Carrie Lee Rothgeb, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*, Vol. III (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963).p. 192.

[14] Donald Kuspit, 'A Mighty Metaphor: The Analogy of Archaeology and Psychoanalysis', in *Sigmund Freud and Art: his personal collection of antiquities*, ed. Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), pp. 133–152.

devolves to linguistic error. These typically arise from the manner in which phenomena are often described in terms of metaphysics (abstract theories that are presumed to pre-exist and explain the human endeavours under examination) rather than acknowledging the observer's lack of perception, the observer having been captivated by the way in which *a priori* descriptions skew the phenomena. Norman Malcolm's *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden* both includes and extends Wittgenstein's thought on this matter.[15]

In practice, the therapist may be as unaware as the patient as to the *meaning* of the patient's behaviour, but that is quite another matter. To make behaviour explicit is not to look for something *hidden*, but to reinterpret the significance of what the patient is openly describing week after painful week. Just as in the first to second centuries CE, Claudius Ptolemy was able to produce predictions of planetary movement from what would be seen today as a hopelessly confused view of the cosmos, so can Freud's observations be useful; but this no more proves his theories of the hidden than, as Wittgenstein observed, the actor actually feels 'inside' what his character expresses on stage.[16] The suggestion that the unknown is *hidden* or *occult* just because it is not understood is a good example of the tendency to invent a story about what can clearly be seen in terms of what can't be seen, and then using the unseen to explain the visible. In doing so it returns the search for individual meaning to an 'explanation' that, magically, was assumed to pre-exist its occurrence. This is another example of a confusion of language games, where the language of science – which legitimately posits 'hidden causes' (genes, viruses, etc.) to explain physical manifestations – has been unthinkingly employed by psychologists to examine mental life, a move that Wittgenstein claims can only 'lead us into darkness'.[17]

In psychotherapy, descriptions of familiar events can have their individual usage suddenly stripped away by the therapist when they are differently described in terms of a theory (a view) about them; new possibilities then emerge when experienced through the lens of a new language. At such moments our world changes, for language comprises our world.[18] Might a therapist's interpretation – a form of words – be

[15] Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 2, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 7e.
[17] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 18.
[18] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, para. 5.6

experienced as magical if the patient's perceptions – and thus their world – is radically transformed as a consequence? Similarly, many Cognitive Behavioural Therapists will ask their patients to think differently about themselves, often giving them specific phrases to use with the aim of changing their perceptions. Are these phrases forms of incantations? Is this magic if it works, for there is no agreement on what is meant by 'thinking'.[19]

In terms of the 'occult' sources that figure in Freud's thought, it is interesting to record that a noted historian of psychoanalysis has drawn attention to the influence that both the Kabala and the interpretation of the Talmud had on Freud, claiming that 'the fundamental principles of dream interpretation used by Freud are already present in the Talmud',[20] and that the Talmudic interpretative tradition, which often draws on word-play and the importance of associations spoken at the time of the interpretation, fully recognised the significance between a dream's manifest and latent meanings.[21]

In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* Freud drew attention to possible meanings in everyday events: the forgotten appointment, the slip of the tongue, etc.[22] Freud's interest in language led him to believe that there was an Ur Language that underlay all speech. He believed that speech originally emerged from the cries and gestures of our earliest ancestors' sexual desire, acknowledging the theories of the philologist Hans Sperber.[23] Some of Freud's views on the origins of language have been extensively questioned;[24] however, the mythology of a God-given language is embedded in the creation myths of many cultures, some of which claim that to understand and use such words with insight endows the

[19] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar: Part 1, The Proposition, and its Sense*, trans. Anthony Kenny, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 154–164; Martin Heidegger, 'On the Essence of Truth' in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (London: Routledge, 1996).
[20] David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1958), p. 258.
[21] Bakan, *Freud and Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 247.
[22] Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
[23] Michel Arrivé, *Linguistics and Psychoanalysis: Freud, Saussure, Hjelmslev, Lacan and others*, Vol. 4 of *Semiotic Crossroads*, trans. James Leader (Paris: John Benjamins Publishing, 1992).
[24] John Forrester, *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1985).

speaker with magical power. But one of Wittgenstein's students, Maurice Drury, who later became a psychiatrist, gave a stern warning. He said of psychotherapy that it comprises

> ... highly skilled procedures requiring years of apprenticeship. To communicate these skills from one generation to another psychologists have developed their own technical language... The danger arises when one learns the language without mastering the skills it is meant to mediate.[25]

Many folk stories have been written about acolytes who have seized upon magic spells, only to find, at great cost, that they held unconsidered consequences.

Before considering Wittgenstein's concept of language games and the manner in which their various usages can be employed, it is interesting to note Freud's reply to a research paper sent to him by his colleague Wilhelm Fliess, in which Fliess apparently supplied evidence for astrology. Freud wrote to Fliess: 'There is something to these ideas; it is the symbolic presentiment of unknown realities with which they have in common… one cannot escape from acknowledging heavenly influences. I bow before you as honorary astrologer'.[26] Freud apparently destroyed all of Fliess' letters some time after 1904 for reasons that have never been made clear.[27] In his book *Freud and Man's Soul* the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim also drew attention to astrology when discussing Freud's seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, stating 'the English title gives the impression that Freud presented a definitive treatise on dreams; by failing to summon associations with astrology, it does not suggest the parallel between the discovery of the true nature of the universe and the discovery of the true inner world of the soul'.[28] As Derrida observes, from Plato onwards many thinkers espousing a rational understanding of humanity are often beguiled by the language of what, upon further consideration, they might hold

[25] Maurice O'Connor Drury, *The Danger of Words* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. 138.
[26] Jeffrey Mason, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887–1904* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 200.
[27] Mason, *Letters of Freud to Fliess*, p. 5.
[28] Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 70.

second thoughts. [29] Or, as Wittgenstein put it, we risk 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by the means of language'.[30]

**Language Games**

Wittgenstein claimed that we use words in all sorts of ways, and each usage contains its own mythology, its own practice. Much of his work in *Philosophical Investigations, Part 1* is devoted to giving extensive examples of this central tenet. To report an event is not the same as singing about it, making a joke about it, creating a diagram of it, or praying for an answer to it. There is always the matter of intention; often that intention is to make something happen, as with magic. Wittgenstein used the phrase 'language games' to draw attention to the fact that all games (chess, football, etc.) have their unique rules (which is what makes them games) but also that these rules are not interchangeable. However, in everyday life we tend to favour a singular example (the wish to see everything described in scientific terms, through the lens of psychoanalysis, religion, political theory or the demands of the academy, etc.). Thus we risk being 'bewitched' by language itself and so fail to notice how an understanding of its Mercurial nature can only be understood within each specific context.[31] The act of kissing the picture of a lover or a saint is incomprehensible without a felt sense of what it is to be in love, or to hold a religious view. Neither can sensibly return to any objective explanation, for all such 'explanations' tend to cast their shadows onto the phenomena they seek to examine. When scientists search for a cause, they tend to ignore the fact that causality is not a law which nature obeys, but the form of words in which science states its propositions about nature.

Such statements might initially make sense because they are internally consistent (and thus bewitch us) so we tend to ignore the possibility that the whole premise on which they are based could be flawed, and thus attempt to prove our theses by utilizing the same methodology from which they were created. This is akin to someone buying a second copy of the same newspaper to check the veracity of the first one. Even mathematics is not immune from this (see below). Similarly, much academic research is bedevilled by such assumptions, which generally seek confirmation of an

[29] Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 112.
[30] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations, Part 1* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 47.
[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 57.

enquiry without questioning on what *its* initial assumptions lie. And assumptions they are, for they can never be finally grounded. They are recursive arguments that hover, so to speak, over the *unspeakable*. This is one of the central points of the *Tractatus*, to which Wittgenstein often returned: that what we can usefully say about the world rests on what we *cannot* formally articulate. If you like, it rests on an inchoate, embodied sense of the world and ourselves which grounds our being in ways that we cannot ultimately describe. Magic, as a practice with its own mythology, would also fall into this category. It is a well-used word, but to what does it return?

In section six of *The Tractatus* Wittgenstein addresses the issue of cause and explanation stating:

> At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are explanations of natural phenomena.

So people stop short at natural laws, as did the ancients at God and Fate.

And they both are right and wrong. But the ancients were clearer, insofar as they recognised one clear terminus, whereas the modern system makes it appear as though *everything* were explained.[32]

For Wittgenstein, ancient people, and indeed many who currently hold religious views, acknowledge a terminus. Events and practices are ultimately the way they are because God decreed them so, and thus no further explanations are needed. This is generally unsatisfactory in a more secular world, and while all sorts of conjectured laws are pressed into service to fill the absence of the Deity, they can never hold the authority of what has been removed by their endeavours. In attempting to replace God with science, it has to be acknowledged that there is no way of proving the ultimate veracity of the language game they are using; mathematics itself is an invention that is continually on the move, and thus cannot come to rest on a finite truth. Many forms of mathematics have been created to solve problems that only exist within mathematics, and have no place within the world. As with magic, they 'do' things in their own way and can bring benefits. Their formulae are often as attractive for their beauty to modern physicists as they were for Plato, and the thought of God can still surface in their discussions. Einstein suggested that God did not play dice.[33]

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[32] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, para. 6.371 and 6.372.

[33] Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice? The Mathematics of Chaos* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 1.

Hawking suggests that his theories might lead to 'knowing the mind of God'.[34] Recently billions of euros have been spent on a search for the God-Particle, which apparently might be located under Switzerland – the traditional source of buried wealth.

But mathematics – the practice of counting and measuring that is the bedrock of science – suggests that it offers a picture of reality, but actually returns to a tautology. The formula that ends with the claim: Therefore X=2, tells us only that 2=2. Worse still, it does not tell us what 2 *is* or why 2+2 might equal 4. Yes, it makes sense, for that is how we have been taught. But we cannot state *why* something makes sense to us without returning to a recursive argument, or 'stopping short' – as did the ancients. While mathematics is incredibly useful and makes possible much of today's world, it cannot establish its fundamental veracity as it always comes to rest on its own practice. To suggest otherwise would return us to a universe in which God is the final arbiter, an argument invariably rejected by secularists.

While any reasonably numerate person can use numbers effectively, even if they couldn't calculate as did the Romans (try multiplying L times MCDXV without first translating it into Arabic notation) how do we make sense of Daniel Tammet, who ascribes his amazing ability for calculation to his diagnosis of high-functioning Asperger Syndrome? Tammet offers this description of how he calculates, for example, the fifth power of 37 (69,343,957, if you want to know) or divides 13 by 97 to some 100 decimal places:

> When I divide one number by another, in my head I see a spiral rotating downwards in larger and larger loops, which seem to warp and curve.. When multiplying I see two numbers as distinct shapes. The image changes and a third shape emerges—the correct answer. The process takes a matter of seconds and happens spontaneously.[35]

While most of us can also arrive at the correct answer 'spontaneously' for simple problems, such as 2 x 50 (even if we would be hard pressed to offer an explanation that did not return to a claim that we 'know' this to be so, which is not an explanation at all, but merely evidences that we do know it), his account, although clearly stated, is mysterious. It is based on a practice that effortlessly bypasses the methods we have been taught. While

[34] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1998), p. 193.
[35] Daniel Tammet, *Born on a Blue Day* (London: Hodden & Stoughton, 2006), p. 4.

we may be tempted to think that, somehow or other, he translates the hard currency of numbers into shifting colours and shapes, this would be mistaking our problem with Roman notation, of having to translate letters into Arabic numbers using an established set of criteria (L=50, M=1000, etc.). What Tammet achieves is of quite a different order, for there is no such public agreement on the shape and colour of numbers. His ability fundamentally questions the essential nature of numbers and how they might be portrayed. Insomuch as he can 'do' something that is, I suspect, incomprehensible to those not similarly gifted, can this be thought of as magical?

**The Meanings of Magic**

How is this familiar word to be understood when it tends to be applied to the unfamiliar? Are all of us playing the same language game? Do some of us believe that 'real' magic exists – that there are some people who can *actually* cast spells that make things happen – without any form of trickery? Here the word 'believe' already sets something up. It would not make much sense if I asked you whether you believe in tables and chairs; the word 'belief' carries within itself the mythology of 'doubt' that casts its own shadow on the question and turns it into something else. Thus it is probable that a magician is seen as someone who acts out a linguistic role without authenticity. We are seeing an actor who can cast a spell on the audience that echoes the 'spelling' of his role, but is ultimately as false as the greasepaint on his face. If such was the case, then the word *magic* would be synonymous with *fake*, as Frazer suggested, but could not elucidate. Or is magic a word that defines something not fully understood? If so, is the existence of the universe then magical? Are *we* all magical, even if we do not know ourselves completely?

How could we tell?

If we are unsure as to what is true or false (real magic versus a trick played on the gullible, genuine psychotherapy versus quackery, etc.) and could give no reason for this linguistic distinction, as Frazer acknowledged with regard to magic, then the concept of true and false would be meaningless in such situations as no evaluative criteria could be established. Heidegger amplifies this quandary when discussing true gold and false gold.[36]

His discussion proceeds thus: one coin is described as true, the other false. We can compare one coin to another with reference to its description

[36] Heidegger, 'Essence of Truth', pp. 120–123.

as being true or false and come to a judgement. All well and good. But how can we come to a judgement as to the veracity of the descriptions that *pre-exist* what they seek to validate? We can compare a thing to its referent – that it does or does not accord to a specific description – but how can we assess the authenticity of the definitions in the first place without returning to the object that, apparently, only gains *its* authenticity from descriptions, when the descriptions themselves contain the essential problem? Are the descriptions true or false? And how would we know except, perhaps, by offering further amplifying clauses which, in their turn, would require yet further substantiation *ad infinitum*?

Now, at least may I make one thing clear. I am not going to wander off into the far reaches of post-modernism and decry 'reality' as a purely linguistic artefact. For me, the concept of authenticity has real value. In terms of this paper there would be a profound difference between magic as a trick – and thus not magic at all – and some form of practice that, inexplicably, has a demonstrable consequence. Nor do I suggest that just because something is meaningful to individuals that it necessarily substantiates the authenticity of their claims. In the course of my work as a psychotherapist I have met two people who held the opinion that they were Jesus Christ. While such claims might emerge from a misunderstanding of the Christian claim that God is within us, having erroneous ideas about ourselves is hardly uncommon. Others have offered examples of what is known as magical thinking: the belief that their thoughts are controlled by rays emitted by the television. Here I would have to ask: to what extent are all our thoughts about the world informed by what we have read or heard? How powerful words can be!

Those holding extreme views of themselves tend to be in thrall to their intense convictions, in the face of which no other opinion counts; in other words, the world is ignored in favour of Cartesian self-reference. Kenny states that Descartes assumed that the mind 'can recognize its own thoughts while holding in suspense the question of the existence of the external world'.[37] As it is precisely the external world (language, culture, etc.) which endows us with all the concepts we believe (or doubt, in Descartes' case) it is clear that the classic Cartesian mind/body split is deeply flawed, although many experiencing delusions or other forms of mental suffering appear to act in the manner Descartes describes, where aspects of the world are assumed to have originated from within themselves.

[37] Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein* (London: Pelican Books, 1975), p. 16.

For example, many of those diagnosed as suffering from an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) have clear rituals – hand-washing, counting, making gestures – that are used to ameliorate their anxiety. While these rituals tend to bring temporary relief, sufferers generally acknowledge the ultimate futility of their actions and are often embarrassed by them. But the idea of cleansing rituals is powerful in many cultures and forms an essential part of innumerable religious practices. In the case of OCD it would seem that the idea of ritual behaviour has somehow lost its mythological roots and become dissociated from a social context, consequently devoid of authentic meaning. Many therapists acknowledge the importance of ritual in their own work: the same time each week, the same room, and so on. Therapeutic time is not linear, but better accords with sacred or mythological time when 'the same' returns, as do the familiar seasons.

I raise these points, not in any way to suggest that magical rites are pathological – although some might be carried out for confused and ultimately useless purposes which might benefit from investigation – but to draw attention to how ritual plays a part in many different language games, of which formal magic is but one.

But what of astrology, a craft that interprets the mathematics of the solar system in its own way? As well as being a psychotherapist, I am also an astrologer. That is, I draw on various models that attempt to make sense of the human subject and the world by using the language game of astrology in ways that are meaningful to me. But I do not indulge in any occult practices. Quite the reverse. All that I have published over thirty years has been written *explicitly* to describe those astrological practices that I find useful, and those that I do not.[38]

While I can explain why I find certain approaches *useful* by supplying examples I cannot demonstrate their ultimate correctness. Such an attempt would miss the point that both Wittgenstein and Heidegger have raised with regard to the impossibility of ultimately measuring *how* we measure. How do we know that the manner in which we perceive, measure, and describe the world is the *correct* way? Again, this would demand access to a God-given injunction: the final terminus that Wittgenstein drew attention to in the *Tractatus*.

[38] Michael Harding, *Hymns to the Ancient Gods* (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1992); Michael Harding and Charles Harvey, *Working with Astrology* (Frome: Consider Books, 2004).

There can be no final judge, beyond their applicability in the life of an individual, which is far from unimportant. And if I make a correct prediction, would this be an objective proof of astrology? No. For if asked *how* I had done this, all I could do would be to return to a description of my method. I cannot state why it worked. Yes, I might have an insight that others might miss, just as others may see what I have failed to recognise, but this is true of any discipline. Indeed, all research is beset with disagreement. In this respect Rudiger Safranski, a former student of Heidegger, observed:

> ... nature offers different answers according to how we question it... And all of this is a creative process, since every design of Being produces, materially and spiritually, a world interpreted and organized in a definite way.[39]

The point is that we tend to focus exclusively on what has been revealed, and not on the fact that *the world* is such that this can happen; i.e., ultimately our quandaries lie in what we have taken from the world. The central issue – the fact of Being itself – has been ignored at the moment of its showing, obscured by a 'truth' that is always partial and, like language, is always on the move.

But this, so it appears, is similarly suggested by science.

**Cosmic Habituation**

A new concept has recently emerged in the field of medical research: Cosmic Habituation. The phrase evolved as a consequence of researchers noting that initial findings were convincingly replicated, but as time went by the significance dropped off. Once, those diagnosed as psychotic who were given certain drugs at the onset of their condition reported real benefit. Today, those experiencing similar distress, and being given the *same* medication for the *first* time, do not respond in the same way as those treated identically in earlier times. It is fundamental to science that, if the same procedures are used in the same circumstances, there should be similar outcomes. But this appears not to be the case. Thus has emerged the remarkable idea that the cosmos is changing in some inexplicable manner. In 2011 the journal *Nature* carried a research paper that drew attention to this phenomenon, subsequently termed Cosmic Habituation.[40]

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[39] Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 219.

[40] John Schooler, 'Unpublished Results Hide the Decline Effect', *Nature* 470 (2011): p. 437.

Somehow or other, we appear to be living in a world that is time-dependent. When repeated, the same procedures do not produce the same results. This would appear to echo the astrological model which claims that all is in flux; while essential human concerns contain much similarity, how they are expressed in the everyday world shifts within its unique language that, like all languages, does not stay still.

The idea of Cosmic Habituation presents a challenge to the traditional scientific model with its suggestion that, with all on the move, there can be no certain point of departure, and thus little hope for a unified theory of everything: in other words, the idea of a universal meta-language that Wittgenstein so forcibly rejects.

This is equally true for those astrologers who seek the validation of some assumed originating source. As a version of this paper was given at the *Celestial Magic* conference we should end with the thought that, while the act of 'reading the stars' for the purpose of obtaining meaning is of a different order than reading a book, both practices rely on agreed-upon procedures for the interpretation of signs. All forms of language are deeply mysterious. What mystery is taking place as you read this?

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