



A General Theory of Magic

Marcel Mauss , Henri Hubert , Robert Brain (Translator)

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First written by Marcel Mauss and Henri Humbert in 1902, *A General Theory of Magic* gained a wide new readership when republished by Mauss in 1950. As a study of magic in 'primitive' societies and its survival today in our thoughts and social actions, it represents what Claude Levi-Strauss called, in an introduction to that edition, the astonishing modernity of the mind of one of the century's greatest thinkers. The book offers a fascinating snapshot of magic throughout various cultures as well as deep sociological and religious insights still very much relevant today. At a period when art, magic and science appear to be crossing paths once again, *A General Theory of Magic* presents itself as a classic for our times.

A General Theory of Magic Details

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From Reader Review A General Theory of Magic for online ebook

Cláudia says

ENFIM, cabe! um livrinho de 180 páginas que me deu um trabalhão, mas também resolveu a minha vida em muitos sentidos haha

O que o Mauss faz é, para a área de pesquisa dele e no período em que o estudo foi publicado, bastante inovador. Basicamente, ele leva a magia a sério, e procura esmiuçá-la com dedicação. Em nenhum momento o autor entra no mérito da magia "existir" ou não; o valor do rito é o próprio rito e não é mensurável pela sua efetividade, ao contrário da ciência. Mauss discute tradições, examina o cerne mágico, a figura do feiticeiro e da bruxa. É uma leitura dura, mas incrível. Poderia ter mil páginas e eu leria com prazer (mas provavelmente levaria uns 5 anos pra terminar haha).

Uma leitura indispensável pra quem se interessa por esse tema. :)

Alexander says

What kind of thing is magic, exactly? Or better, what makes magic the kind of thing it is, as distinct from, say, religion, science, art, or philosophy? This is the question that *A General Theory of Magic* aims to answer. Not a theory FOR magic, but a theory OF magic is set out here in this classic of anthropological research. From shape-shifting to spell-binding, incantation to malediction, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert thus scour the arcane terrain of magical practice to draw out its specificity amongst the far-flung field of cultural production.

Setting themselves most distinctly against James Frazer's theory of magic as 'sympathetic action' (in which like causes produce like effects - as in: water magic producing rain, etc), *A General Theory's* most immediate goal is in fact to show how magic cannot be understood in terms of any one of its disparate elements; not this or that magical principle defines magic, but rather its 'totality' as a phenomenon - one including magical actors, beliefs, rituals, objects, traditions and representations, all of which, only when taken together, properly delimit the field of magic.

In a word: magic is a social phenomenon. A strange result! After all, isn't magic instead a furtive practice, one done in candle-lit cravens and in the shadows of society? True, say Mauss and Hubert, but close attention to the actual practice of magic nonetheless reveals its highly orchestrated and tightly regulated character: spells are formulas, indifferent to meaning ("*abracadabra!*") while magical objects simply 'play the part' in rites and rituals largely uncaring as to their specificity; in all things magic, it is in fact convention which rules its operation.

Having established this already important result however, for Mauss and Hubert, the heart of magic lies deeper still - not just *any* social phenomenon, but one involving the exercise of 'magical causality': a type of causality running in 'parallel', as it were, with the everyday, pedestrian causes we are all familiar with. In turn, this magical causality is premised on a kind of force - familiar with every video game player - here dubbed *mana*. Now, the ambiguities surrounding the invocation of 'mana' are multiple and well known, but they can be summed up by asking whether all of this is just to say that magic is... well, magical. So the success of 'A General Theory' isn't a given, but as far as starts go, it's a damn fine one.

Matthew says

Written in 1902, this book feels a lot fresher than 116 years old.

His treatment of the topic feels very modern and I am positive I will be returning for many re-reads.

Highly recommend.

Maurice says

weggegeven

Pierre-Jean says

Malheureusement pas entièrement lu, suite à de nombreux décrochages en cours de lecture. Le propos général est intéressant, mais citer du grec ancien et considérer que le lecteur le lit et le comprend sans problème nuit à l'appropriation du texte, quand on est un jeune lecteur du XXIème siècle...

Eugene Plawiuk says

This work is essential for those who want an unvarnished easy to read sociological/anthropological study of ancient magic and shamanism, the witch shaman as outsider, magic predates religion, magic practices control of or over deities, religion requires sacrifice to a deity, prayers to a deity, while magick like science is about understanding nature and nature's god(dess) and how the world works, it is a science of empiricism; do this ritual this way and this will happen.

The difference between magic and religion is crucial and is misconstrued as being the same because both use ritual.

Yannis says

Well, ok it's not that epic but it describes some basic things about magic as part of a society. Differences and similarities with religion, whether people believe it's real, who practice it and how. It refers to many different cultures, from medieval western Europe, grecoroman world, America, across the ocean...you name it. But there's no list, they just get some reference as an example here and there. Surprisingly for such an old book it's a nice and pleasant read. Interesting for both an anthropologist but also anyone into fantasy, coming to think of it. Also, it's short, you won't get tired. There are I guess longer, more modern, perhaps better similar books but this is an old classic.

Draco3seven Crawdady says

"each one is the whole and the whole is in each one" on why magic.... change something in or out... and you change something in the whole... if obscurity is not you're cup of tea... I suggest you not sit down and pour your self a cup of tea... the subjective and objective are connected... where you act or will is correlated through the ritual/other... Why? Why not? there is a system of categories central to magic thinking... one being sympathetic relationships... "(Mars=war, etc). in summary, far from the idea of sympathy being the presiding principal in the formation of ideas concerning properties, it is the notion of property and the social conventions behind the objects which allow the collective spirit to link together the sympathetic bonds concerned."

pg115 "Belief in magic, then, a priori is quasi a obligatory and exactly analogous to belief in religion." so then magic is only possible if the case is pre affirmed.

"the magician is appointed by society and initiated by a restricted group of magicians to whom society has delegated its power to create magicians. quite naturally he assumes the spirit of his function, (with) the gravity of a magistrate. he is serious about it because he is taken seriously, and he is taken seriously because people have a need of him."

"A magical judgement is imposed by a kind of convention which establishes, prejudicially, that a symbol will create an object, and a part will create the whole, a word, the event and so on." my question is what the difference with materials in this regard? atomical abstract being to the the observed sensual object... This relationship then being reproduced in the minds of several individuals... becomes a social process... then creating its own ontological sphere of being... becomes real being. "The universality and the a priori nature of magical judgements appear to us to be the sign of their collective origin."

Trevor says

I'd never actually heard of this guy before – but I was reading Bourdieu's lectures on the state and he recommended reading this. So, I tracked it down. Probably the first piece of advice is to skip the foreword and come back to it after you have read the book itself. This is because it assumes you know what Mauss has said anyway and also that you know something of Levi-Strauss's work – and I'm not sure either is necessary before you start reading and neither make reading this any easier. The foreword provides a critique of Mauss's work mostly around his understanding of mana. Now, mana is such a difficult concept for me that it hardly seems surprising that this is where disagreement about this book would take place – the luck of the Irish, I think they call it. I really struggled with this idea and am still not sure I've understood it. So, let's start with mana and work out from there.

Mana is a Polynesian concept. I first came across it when I read a history of New Zealand a few years ago. The author of that history talked about eating people so as to gain their mana. In some ways this means more than just their spirit – you could almost look at it as something similar to boy scouts' badges, well, if you were allowed to eat boy scouts... It is not only people that have mana – the whole world does, but the point is that mana is what gives things their efficacy, their power, their ability to produce effects on the world. The boy scout reference is more to their badges for achieving various things – mana is kind of like those. This efficacy comes from the spiritual realm, a realm that exists almost in a kind of fourth dimension in relation to the world we see and feel and live in consciously. As the author says, this geometrical metaphor of a fourth and unseen dimension is so apt that it has been immediately adopted by spiritualists since it became understood. There are the three dimensions we can see and then there is this hidden dimension that we can't, but things that happen in that dimension causes things to happen (or not happen) in the world we can see too.

So, you can think of magic as a kind of physical science in a world where part of reality is eternally hidden from us – or, at least, hidden from most of us. That hidden world provides us with our skills, our illnesses, our accidents and so on – our mana. Gaining some sort of access to that hidden place is, therefore, pretty well essential.

Now, mana is one word for this in one tradition, but the authors argue that something like mana is common to all magical traditions.

We gain access to this hidden world by various forms of magic. Magic, in this view, falls somewhere between science and religion. It is like religion because this hidden world is essentially spiritual, and it is similar to science because you can effect this hidden world through undertaking various activities in this world – mostly by doing things that have some sort of sympathetic relationship between this world and the other world. The relationship to science here is particularly interesting, which is something the author makes clear, as so much of modern science was basically born out of various magical traditions – not just medicine, but also physics, astronomy, chemistry, and botany. Think Newton and his fascination for alchemy.

The point of this book is literally to provide a scientific basis for understanding the role played by magic in society – particularly in what are termed ‘primitive societies’, although, it quickly becomes clear that it is difficult to maintain a distinction between ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’ with these ideas. The conclusion that is reached is that magic only makes sense if it is understood as a social activity and that it is only effective to the extent that it is already believed in by society. I could wander about making strange noises, burning leaves and swearing in Ancient Greek, but if no one understands I’m casting spells, then no spells are really being cast. Like theatre, a magician needs an audience. But it also needs props too.

Magic is like science, but also not. Experimentation in science is to see what will happen if you do something – in magic you do things because you already know how you believe they will turn out. And this is why we think science is able to replace magic, we expect that if a ritual can be shown to not work, or if we give someone ‘proper medicine’ and they get well, then the need for magic ought to disappear. But magic is, as philosophers say, an a priori way of understanding the world, a way of seeing it that is fundamentally cultural, a lens that we look through – but look through before we see. It isn’t that magic is primitive science and therefore modern science should just sweep it away – but rather than magic provides a way of understanding the world that can just as easily encompass modern science, religion and ritual spells. To someone who believes in magic, in a realm that is forever present but invisible, it is that fundamental belief that makes sense of the world – and that making sense includes the world of science because science is always ‘this worldly’, while magic also sees into the hidden realm.

A word that I’m not sure is used at all in this text, but that seemed to resonate throughout, is metaphor – and I had never really thought of it as being quite so central to the idea of magic. At one point Mauss says, “it can be said that symbolic structures are present in three schematic forms, each corresponding to one of three formulas: like produces like; like acts on like; opposite acts on opposite” Page 89. A large part of this work is a critique of Frazer’s idea that all magic is sympathetic – that is, that like acts on like – but the role of metaphor in this idea of sympathy is really powerful. Magic says that you might eat a yellow frog to cure jaundice or an elephant’s horn to cure impotence. This also is similar to ideas in homeopathy, I guess – the idea of like curing like. But the idea that the world is composed of dualities, particularly of the similar and the different, is interesting because this means the world is essentially metaphorical and metaphors can be much more complex things than we generally recognise.

Magic is about effecting change – that seems pretty clear. You don’t cast a spell, call forth a demon or mix a potion unless you want to cause some effect on the world. But the means of effecting that change is often bought about by way of some metaphorical similarity between the dysfunction you are seeking to ‘cure’ and the implement you are using to cure it with. But things are often much more complex than we imagine them to be and the metaphorical similarity is often a kind of preferred view of the relationship between the two

things. Sorry, I'm making this harder than I mean to. Let's pretend you want to make your girlfriend more graceful. On the 'like acts on like' idea you might cut some strands of her hair and use it as a kind of rope to strangle a swan to death. Swans are graceful, there is a contact between your girlfriend and the swan by your using her hair to kill the swan – potentially, you could imagine a magic rite such as this being performed to effect a change to your girlfriend (in fact, Mauss discusses many magical performances that are remarkably similar to this to blind enemies and such). Anyway, swans aren't just graceful. Out of water they are anything but. As one of my favourite jokes goes, "yeah, she is a swan: not terribly graceful, but she has a ridiculously long neck and a constantly damp bum." Like I said, things have more properties than those we choose to stress in our metaphors – our metaphors stress one and ignore the rest. It isn't clear how magic, which appears to work on metaphor, is able to limit the properties it wants to connect with to just those that link disease to cure. Except, of course, this is exactly the point Mauss is making— magic works metaphorically because magic and metaphor are both socially defined. We see the relationship because the metaphorical relationship hides all of the other relationships that could exist but that don't because our metaphors don't stress those relations. The stressed relations are conventional, not arbitrary. Although, sometimes they are arbitrary too – when certain plants, for instance, are linked to certain planets and therefore become effective according to being picked at particularly times of the month or year.

And that is the point of this book. It is only in social relationships that magic can be thought of as working at all. This is why the fact that a magic spell that doesn't do what is hoped it will doesn't automatically disprove magic. If I said that the cure for a headache was crushing the petals of a rose between your fingers and thumb, it shouldn't take too long to learn this doesn't actually work – but if this is part of a long lasting ritual, then belief in the ritual doesn't have to require the ritual actually working, at least not every time or immediately. Rather, the ritual might be undermined by other forms of magic, which then also need to be taken into consideration. The magic is already believed in according to this idea – if the spell doesn't work it isn't because magic itself doesn't work, but because some other form of magic is being used to counteract it. Magical belief is primary – experience, which comes after and is understood via this belief can't disprove magic, because experience is understood through magic.

A seriously interesting book. Some quotes:

the idea of the sacred is a social idea, that is, it is a product of collective activities
page 11

Sympathy is a sufficient and inevitable feature of magic; all magical rites are sympathetic and all sympathetic ritual is magical. Page 15+16

Magic is, therefore, the foundation of the whole mystical and scientific universe of primitive man. Page 16

Actions which are never repeated cannot be called magical. Page 23

It follows from this that strictly individual actions, such as the private superstitions of gamblers, cannot be called magical. Page 23

in other languages the words for magic contain the root to do. Page 24

We might go so far as to say that there are evil spells which are evil only in so far as people fear them. Page 27

Magical rites are commonly performed in woods, far away from dwelling places, at night or in shadowy corners Page 28

On the other hand, since women are excluded from most religious cults—or if admitted, reduced to a passive

role—the only practices left to them on their own initiative are magical ones. Page 35

The curious result is that on the whole, it is the men who perform the magic while women are accused of it. Page 35

Magic is also part and parcel of some professions. Doctors, barbers, blacksmiths, shepherds, actors and gravediggers have magical powers, which clearly are not attributes of individuals but of corporate groups. Page 36

When two cultures come into contact, magic is usually attributed to the lesser developed. Page 39

It is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields. Page 50

It seems from older texts and also from modern descriptions that the brighter half of the month was reserved for rites of good omen, while the darker dates were devoted to those of evil omen. Page 57

Naturally enough, however, these catalogues do not exist, since magicians have only ever felt the need to classify their rites according to their aims, not according to their procedures. Page 63

On the whole, if there is no sacrifice in religion it is also lacking in magic. Page 65

Puns and onomatopoeic phrases are among the many ways of combating sickness verbally through sympathetic magic. Page 68

All over the world people value archaisms and strange and incomprehensible terms. Page 71

Magic has always speculated on polarity and opposition: good and bad fortune, cold and hot, water and fire, freedom and coercion. Page 88

it can be said that symbolic structures are present in three schematic forms, each corresponding to one of three formulas: like produces like; like acts on like; opposite acts on opposite. Page 89

Everything has something in common with everything else and everything is connected with everything else. Page 91

The grouping of things by opposites is also a method of classification. It is really a way of thinking which is basic to all magical systems, that is, the division of everything into at least two groups: good and evil, alive and dead. Page 97

Magic has little poetry. We do not find many stories about its demons. Page 105

Magic is not interested in them as individuals, but as wielders of properties, powers whether generic or specific in nature. Page 105

There is no such thing as an inactive, honorary magician. 108

The magician often qualifies professionally through being a member of an association of magicians. In the final count, however, he always receives this quality from society itself. His actions are ritualistic, repeated according to the dictates of tradition. Page 109

Magic, by definition, is believed. Page 113

Magic, like religion, is viewed as a totality; either you believe in it all, or you do not. Page 113

We have examples of obstinate credulity and deeply rooted faith crumbling before a single experience. Page 113

Magical beliefs, of course, derive from experience: nobody seeks out a magician unless he believes in him; a remedy is tried only if the person has confidence in it. Page 114

Fortuitous coincidences are accepted as normal facts and all contradictory evidence is denied. Page 115

The second type of ritual, practised primarily by the southern, central and western tribes, involves the removal of the fatty parts of a person's liver. It is believed that the sorcerer approaches his sleeping victim, cuts open his side with a stone knife, removes the fat and closes the wound before leaving the spot. The victim dies slowly, unaware of anything untoward having happened. Quite clearly this rite could never have actually been carried out. Page 116

while the sorcerer may have only a mitigated confidence in his own rites and is doubtless aware that the so-called magical poisoned arrows, which he removes from the bodies of people suffering from rheumatism, are only pebbles taken from his mouth, the same sorcerer still has recourse to another medicine man when he himself falls ill. Page 117

But the witches, victims of their delusions, continued to boast about them, to their own detriment, finally imposing their fantasies on the Church. Page 117

In cases such as these, we are not dealing with simple matters of fraud. Page 118

He is not a free agent. He is forced to play either a role demanded by tradition or one which comes up to his client's expectations. Page 118

He is serious about it because he is taken seriously, and he is taken seriously because people have need of him. Page 119

Magic is believed and not perceived. Page 119

Magic as a whole is, therefore, an object a priori of belief, a belief which is unanimous and collective. Page 119

Anything which possesses magical properties, by its very nature, is a form of rite. Page 127

Mana is not simply a force, a being, it is also an action, a quality, a state. In other terms the word is a noun, an adjective and a verb. Page 133

everything happens as if it were part of a fourth spatial dimension. Page 145

These values do not depend, in fact, on the intrinsic qualities of a thing or a person, but on the status or rank attributed to them by all-powerful public opinion, by its prejudices. They are social facts not experimental facts. Page 148

All over the world where magic flourishes, magical judgments existed prior to magical experience. They are the canons of the ritual, the links in the chain of representations. Experiences occur only in order to confirm them and almost never succeed in refuting them. Page 152

We cannot conceive of any magical judgment which is not the object of a collective confirmation. Page 153

It is because the result desired by everyone is expressed by everyone, that the means are considered apt to produce the effect. Page 154

if we may hazard a somewhat radical hypothesis concerning individual psychology, it does not appear to us that isolated individuals, or even the human race as a whole, can really reason inductively. They can merely acquire instincts and habits which, in fact, lead to the abolition of all reflection on actions. Page 155

Moreover, magic is closely bound up with the whole system of collective taboos, including religious prescriptions, to such an extent that we are never quite sure whether the magical character of an object derives from the taboo or the taboo derives from its magical character. Page 158

We are ourselves firmly convinced that group sentiments will always be found at the origin of all magical manifestations, whether the magic was borrowed from an earlier religion or an outside religion, or whether they sprang from the world of magic itself. Page 169

While the Inquisition certainly burned more innocent people than real witches, it also served to generate them. Page 169

Magic has no genuine kinship with anything apart from religion on the one hand and science and technology on the other. Page 174

Magic is essentially the art of doing things Page 175

10001010001 says

This is going to be a very Nietzschean review.

When people in religious study talks about magic, they would often bring up this puzzling intertwine between magic and science. They would assume that magic has indeed led to the accumulation of scientific knowledge, but the mechanism of science and magic are so different that it would be hard to imagine they are somehow similar.

Well, it's perhaps because they don't get to hear the insider's talk in science. I remember my advisor saying this in an algebraic number theory class: "In algebra, you make the definitions carefully enough so that everything follows canonically." And by canonically, he meant "it's going to be what you think it is". Later on in a weekly meeting he said to me: "What usually happen in algebraic geometry is that, you have some intuition of what this thing should be, and you work towards proving your wish is right. Quite often the machine by Grothendieck would spit out the right answer."

I guess I should call my advisor "a philosopher-king and a great Wizard of algebraic geometry", because things were never that "smooth" for me, and the Grothendieck machine in my hand is far from being that "tamed". But then, one could see in these two cases that, just like magic is driven by making what you want come true, wish-fulfilling is a powerful motivation driving scientific research forward — at least for mathematicians specialized in algebraic geometry.

~~Luckily, my advisor won't get to read this.~~

Is magic, which we think about as a highly individualized, secretive, antisocial, instrumental activity as much a 'social construction' as religion, which we think of as collective, public, social, and in-and-for-itself? Yep.

Patricio Borvarán says

You really need to be into magical thinking if you get this book. I mean, is indeed interesting for a while, but later is remarkably evident that instead of the question: how magic works? the question: how a person becomes a believer about magic in this time? is way more interesting and intriguing.

Now, thinking as a person really interested on this, you have a short book, concluding several elements about magic, Frazer is constantly quoted and few times updated, but here is easier and faster to get and understand. Not a great book for me, but must be useful to whom are into this field or beginning on it.

Took me a loooooong time.

Priya says

I loved the book, but was disappointed with the translation.

(Note to self: learn French)
