

Tractatus Logico-Magicus: A Definition of Magic in Three Throws of the Die*

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Abstract

The title of this essay matches its ambition: its purpose is nothing less than to define magic in modern philosophical terms. Yet the Wittgensteinianism of the title also reflects the irony of this ambition: through the metaphor of a thrice thrown die, the essay foregrounds the aleatoriness of its argument and the elusiveness of its object. Magic, it will be argued here, is a quality that is ascribed to a given object, and it is in that ascription, in the *predicative assertion* that a thing possesses magic, that its logic must be sought. However, rather than scan the history of esoteric or occult thought for such assertions, the essay will draw upon Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* to argue that magic is not so much a quality in itself as it is the emotional transformation of a pre-existing quality. Following Sartre's view that emotion effects a magical transformation upon the world, the essay will conclude by arguing that the ascription of magic to a thing is true only if the very act of assertion transforms its ascriptive logic – emotionally, and, therefore, magically.

Keywords: emotion; language; logic; magic; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Feuerbach, Ludwig

Imagine discovering in some distant field a small object of blackish hue. Dodecahedral, with edges too sharp and regular to be hand-hewn, each of its marmoreal faces is furrowed with groups of whitish lines, some curved and some jagged, others crossed with additional dashes; smooth and solid to the touch, it lacks the compaction of stone and the grainy cut of wood. As you weigh and ponder it, its plastic body glinting with the moisture of freshly troubled earth, it strikes you as being of immense age, as if it had lain there for centuries, absorbing time like water. And though you do not comprehend the markings, which you

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think may represent a fragment of an alphabet, there appears to be a system of permutation that dictates their order and relation, and you are sure that, with the proper tools, you will be able to decipher their intent.

Imagine then that this object prompts you to utter the word magic. Depending on the circumstances of your discovery, what you mean by this word will vary. Assuming that you are an anthropologist, you will perhaps hazard the guess that this object has played some minor role in a complex ritual. Alternatively, if you are a folklorist with an interest in material culture, you may find yourself enthralled by the talismanic qualities of the object: you sense there the presence of emotions once felt and beliefs once held, of vanished worlds recalled to phantasmatic life. As a literary scholar, you may compare it to similar objects as they are found in fictions, more often in fables and fantasy novels than elsewhere, which brings you a step closer to the folklorist; or, if you are an historian of science who is fascinated by the old theory that the natural sciences were built on occult foundations, you may see in this well-wrought artifact a studious effort to model, and perhaps to redirect, the peculiar energies of some heavenly body. And if in any of these incarnations you were familiar with astrological symbols, which, as per the description above, you are not, you would recognize the carvings as the ancient signs of the zodiac.

But let me change the description and grant you this recondite knowledge. In some variations, you will be aware that the object is a die. In others, you will even perceive that this die is the kind that was used in role-playing games. Once considered a trifling thing, a specimen might be bought for as little as £1. But because you are living in the twenty-third century, it will be evident to you that this object was never the mere plaything that previous ages took it to be: it is a machine for generating random combinations, and the sphere of being it commands is cut from the same cloth as the unfortold and unfortellable future. An idol of twelve faces, this piece of plastic is the crafted body of *tuché* and *ananké*, of chance and fate rolled together into a single throw that, as a prophet

of old is remembered to have said, *jamais n'abolira le hasard*.¹ That, you will say, is its *magic*, and how you will define this magic depends, again, on whether you are an anthropologist or a folklorist, a literary scholar or an historian of science, or, to add here a further and more speculative set of variants, an archeoludologist or a paleoepistemographer. For although this is the twenty-third century, you will be no closer to a systematic and consistent concept of magic than your predecessors were, and, like them, cannot use the word without venturing into a thicket of conjunctions and disjunctions, of sympathies and antipathies, that shatter the term into as many incommensurable aspects as there are incommensurable interpretations of it. The indefinability of magic remains an undisputed truth, and you, in all of your disciplinary variations, are cautious enough to know that you can never use the word in a rigorously justified way without specifying or at least signaling the interpretation to which you adhere. Accurate in one sense and erroneous in another, the word remains as splintered in its descriptions as it has been for centuries, and you conclude, not without justification, that it is best not to elevate any single one above the rest.

That is undoubtedly the right thing to do. Yet as you do so, you inadvertently repeat a particular error, a confusion, that has been repeated for centuries before you. Granted, this confusion is indeed inadvertent, born as it is from the effort to ward off a more serious one, yet a confusion it nonetheless remains: a confusion which consists in assuming that this thing called “magic,” being irreducible to its merely linguistic formulations, cannot be better understood through a reflection on the word “magic” as it is used in a predicative sentence of the form “magic is x” or “x is magic.” In other words, it is assumed — if it is possible to assume a notion that does not even cross the threshold of thematizing consciousness — that the question of what magic is cannot be clarified through an analysis of the linguistic forms in which it is captured: whatever magic is, whatever magics there

1. The sage in question, of course, being Stéphane Mallarmé. See Mallarmé, *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*. On Mallarmé as sage, see Robert McGahey, *The Orphic Moment*, 75–100.

may be, linguistic reflection of a formal nature is too linguistic and too formal to have anything of value to contribute. On the contrary, the assumption goes, a linguistic analysis of “magic,” unless it focuses on the “discursive construction” of “magic,” can only muddle the picture: it mistakes what is said of the object with the object itself — and thereby leads to an irremediable confusion of two levels that ought necessarily to be kept separate.

Such, at any rate, is what I, as a philosophically inclined literary scholar, have been able to adduce as the central bit of reasoning that is shared across all the disciplines in which “magic” is a central critical concept: from the fact that there is no one sentence that *incontestably* expresses the essence of magic — “magic is x and nothing but x ” — it is concluded that it is *impossible* for magic at all, as a singular object, to be fitted within the constraints of a sentential form. Yet that is the error; there lies the root of the confusion. And this is the confusion which the present essay will seek to clarify. If this claim strikes you as overstated, consider what all of your scholarly avatars are doing. And not only the fictional ones, but the real ones as well. First of all, in offering their partial impressions of the things they find “magical,” they will necessarily identify certain qualities by which this putative “magic” is identified. And this they will necessarily do, whether expressly or implicitly, in descriptive sentences of the form “magic is x ” (where x is ritual activity, reanimation of the past, causal efficacy, etc.). Secondly, however, they immediately efface this descriptive dimension — this stating that “magic is x ” — by passing over to the side of the object: since we can speak about magic, it evidently is something, but because the things we say of it are not all commensurable, the definition of magic must not be sought by conceptual means, by trying to define the contours of magic *as* magic, but rather by looking at the multiple contexts in which the term is used and the various things which are meant by it. As a consequence, though it is impossible to speak of magic without using predicative language, the only legitimate way to examine magic *as* magic — not *as such* but rather as *something* thus nameable — is to remember that all this language merely serves

— and this is true even in the case of the “discursive construction” of magic — to indicate where the real focus of attention lies. In this view, the best a sentence can do is to state a particular aspect or instance of something that is called “magic”; everything else that it can bring to this question is best left unbrought.

What the following pages will seek to address is this “everything else.” And what they will bring to the question is a perspective that, as yet, has not been tested in any of the fields where magic is a central object of interest. My hope with this essay is that such a test might be undertaken in the future. In his preface to *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice*, Christopher Lehrich calls for a truly interdisciplinary study of magic,² and it is as a response to this call that I wish my intensely abstract and professedly challenging contribution to be taken: it will be useful, I believe, for anyone interested in magic to have a more detailed and consequential understanding of what it means to use the word “magic” in a truth-asserting sentence, and if this essay has any grander objective, it is to facilitate this understanding without thereby disenchanting the central object of inquiry.

Hence the irony — the ironic literalism — of the essay’s title. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein patiently and rigorously bares the propositional bones of everything that factually takes place in the world, and it is with similar patience and rigour — though, I should hope, with a greater dose of humour — that this essay will seek to clarify the propositional structure by which the factual existence of magic is adduced. Briefly, the argument to be put forward here consists of three parts, or, metaphorically, of three throws of the magical die. Having shown in the first section that the lack of a universally valid concept of magic does not entail its dispersal into pure polyvalence, I will argue that the elusiveness of “magic” is partly due to the fact that it can function equally well as the subject term and the predicate term of a propositional sentence. In the second section, I will show that “magic,” when examined as a subject term, is in all cases reducible to a set of underlying predicates by which another thing

2. Lehrich, *The Occult Mind*, xiii–xiv.

is determined as the thing that it is. As subject, it is all predicate; as predicate, it crumbles into a dust of further predicates; and at this stage it becomes wholly impossible to determine how the word should be understood and why it should be used in the first place. In the third section, which is the last and lengthiest of the essay, I will solve this dilemma by showing that an underlying predicate must be understood as the *criterion* by which a given sentence about magic is judged to be either true or false: poetry, for example, is magic when it is extraordinarily poetic. From this basis, drawing on Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, I argue that magic exists only as the *emotional transformation* of this criterial predicate: wherever there is talk of magic, there must be, somewhere in the picture, an experience of this kind. However, rather than conclude from this that magic is nothing more than a matter of emotion, the figment of a consciousness led astray by the irrational power of its affects, I demonstrate, by way of deepening and generalising Sartre's claim, that it is *emotions themselves* that are magical, that this emotional transformation is not a *transformation of the predicate by emotion* but rather the *emotionally apprehended self-transformation* of the criterial predicate itself: the quality named by the predicate becomes magical, in and beyond the sense intended by Sartre, when it is removed from its pragmatic and causally determined context and revealed in experience as being *infinitely what it is*. Revealed, in other words, in its *essence*.

This last sentence points at the ultimate aim of my argument. Rather than offer a definition of magic as such, one that is true for all instances where this word is or may be used, my wish is to transform Sartre's philosophical definition of magic into a *properly philosophical* magic, a magic *internal to philosophy*, which inverts the relation between *explanandum* and *explanans* by asking what happens to the criterion itself when it is magically revealed as infinitely itself. To put it briefly and still enigmatically: *if philosophy can give a definition of magic, this is because definition is the magic of philosophy*.³ Thus, still within the third section

3. By philosophy, of course, I mean here *modern* philosophy, understanding by that word the form of

of the essay, I conclude with the suggestion, more than slightly provocative, that there cannot be a philosophical concept of magic, let alone a philosophy of magic, that is not oriented in some mode or degree towards a *belief* in magic. Not towards an assertion that it is real, which would mean that one cannot theorize magic without believing in it, nor towards what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “belief without belief,” a “disowning intertwined with an ‘as if’” for which magic could only have a fictional existence,⁴ but rather towards an act of *naming*. If magic is something, I will argue, it exists as something that can *give its name* to the otherwise unnamable event of a thing being revealed as infinitely itself. Such as, for example, the chance discovery in a distant field of a strangely marked black object, the object being unnamable to the precise extent that its discovery is also the discovery of what this thing *portends* about itself.

That, at any rate, is the line of thought to be pursued in the following pages. Whether the argument fits the description above – whether, in other words, the dice fall with the same sense of urgency and fascination as they are thrown – remains to be seen; my only wish in this respect is that it will take less than two centuries for us to find out.

1. First throw of the die: there is no universally valid concept of “magic”

In their editorial introduction to the anthology *Defining Magic: A Reader*, Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg argue that the concept of magic should no longer be used as an overarching category in the study of religion: in addition to being ethnocentrically biased and ideologically problematic, the word is semantically too diverse and conceptually too heterogeneous to function properly in the role that it is typically assigned.⁵ However, since the word shows no signs of

rational thought that begins with Descartes and still constitutes the foundation of our contemporary *episteme*. one in which, as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes, the ancient differentiation between *human* and *divine* knowledge has given way to a unified *cogito* for which no human experience counts as knowledge unless it is sanctioned by science. See Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 17–24.

4. Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, 95.

5. Otto & Stausberg, “General Introduction,” 10.

going away, the authors attempt to square this circle by showing that the concept of magic does not need to be abandoned but may instead be rescued in and by its inherent multiplicity. Indeed, as Otto and Stausberg show, the plurality of meanings and practices that make it unable to stand as a “supreme metacategory” may itself be made more exact by being subjected to a degree of formalizing pressure.⁶ To this end, rather than speak of magic *as such*, of magic *itself*, they argue that we should speak of *patterns of magicity*, of “forms and conditions of structural stability” that permit certain characterizations and conceptions of “magic” to occur and re-occur across discursive, cultural, and temporal differences.⁷

It is on these recurrent characterizations and conceptions that the formalizing pressure is applied. After disowning all pretensions to scientificity, the authors devise a notation which brings those same pretensions fully and ironically into play: word magic is graphed as “MWOR,” sign magic morphs into “MSIG,” while the attempt to control the desires of others acquires the abbreviated form of “MDES” — and so on and so forth.⁸ Here, each use of the word “magic” is indexed to a particular context of interpretation that is indicated by the subscript letters, and because each context can be treated as a relatively stable totality of beliefs and practices, the semantic and historical vagueness that plagues the word, with one sense of “magic” smudged into another by the passage of time, is effectively broken up into chunks or modules that would together constitute the proper object of the field.⁹ Thus, for example, the formula “MWOR” “is derived from the recurrent observation that humans tend to ascribe efficacy to the utterance of specific words in ritual sequences and that this pattern of ascription is attested cross-culturally in a multiplicity of sources.”¹⁰ Similarly, “MEVA” refers to “modes of evaluation of ritual activities conducted by specific actors and the views on, and social position of, such actors.”¹¹ For this reason, the patterns

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. See Aspren, “Patterns of Magicity,” 132.

10. Otto & Stausberg, “General Introduction,” 11.

11. *Ibid.*

“do not automatically involve ‘MAGIC’ (as the supreme meta-category), nor are they ‘magic’ (as referring to ontological features), but they are a way of dealing with cross-culturally attested observations. ‘Magicity’ acknowledges the fact that they were traditionally assigned to the overall category ‘MAGIC’ in which we have stopped believing.”¹² If it is not immediately obvious whether this yields any greater clarity, the attempt, at any rate, is commendable, for, as may be seen from the following list, there is indeed a great deal of clarifying to be done. Magic, the authors write, has been described as being:

- coercive;
- manipulative;
- seeking to exercise control of others or change the state of things or other human beings;
- interventionist;
- purely mechanical;
- powerful, self-efficacious ritual action;
- analogical/symbolic/sympathetic;
- typically operative in the form of contagion or similarity;
- imitative and/or mimetic;
- instrumental ritual action with limited aims and scope;
- a practice of obtaining ordinarily unavailable this-worldly benefits;
- a ritual counter-measure against “witchcraft” attacks;
- performed on “critical” occasions;
- based on associative thinking;
- immune to falsification;
- compulsive, hallucinatory behaviour;
- based on a non-ordinary “participatory” worldview or consciousness;
- derived from strong emotions such as anger or fear, related to desires;
- related to (supernatural, invisible) agents or agency typically distinct from gods;

12. Ibid.

- non-legitimate dealing with the supernatural;
- private and/or secret;
- egocentric and/or autistic;
- antisocial or related to societal sub-groups;
- performed by self-employed, non-institutionalized specialists (the “magicians”) serving their clients;
- lacking institutional (infra)structures;
- a specific kind of technique, art or craft requiring special knowledge and/or training;
- associated with “others” such as marginalized groups or outsiders;
- a category and discursive practice of denunciation of “others”;
- immoral or lacking moral considerations;
- characterized by strange or exotic behaviours;
- characterized by a distinctive use of language and words;
- an illocutionary or performative (speech) act;
- producing miraculous events;
- an art of creating illusions, also employed in entertainment.¹³

I have cited this list in full for no other purpose than that of added perplexity – and the clarification that it consequently invites. Exhausting as it is, the list is far from exhaustive, and it may readily be seen why the authors have tried to find a way around it without resorting to an essentialism that treats all these descriptions as particular species of the genus “magic.” Rather, they have given themselves a theoretical tool that enables them to denote an attestable practice of naming, and what they will find named in this practice of naming, rather than magic in itself and as such, is always a set of qualities that are perceived in some historical context as magical. These qualities constitute patterns that may be found in the historical record and discussed with the same degree of objectivity as any other historical phenomenon. And since it is only by their descriptive accuracy that these patterns

13. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

may be evaluated, a not inconsiderable degree of vagueness is dissolved. Because each use of the word is indexed to a particular context or pattern that is explicable in its own terms, it is unnecessary to refer this particular “magic” to any other “magic.” Though various patterns may be cross-referenced and correlated, they are permitted, if need be, to remain in isolation from each other.¹⁴

This, however, is problematic for at least two related and immediately evident reasons. The first is that the model is valid only if the researcher assiduously refrains from the theoretical business of defining and determining the object being researched. Otherwise, the model would constitute yet another pattern of magicity and thereby lose its standing as a *metatheory* of magic. However, although this detachment is indeed necessary, it deprives Otto and Stausberg of a substantial *criterion* by which to distinguish a legitimate “pattern of magicity” — one that arises from a consistent ontological commitment — from a merely spurious one that involves nothing more than the application of the label to any given thing. The difficulties that ensue are multiple, because the lack of a criterion means that every single mention of magic must by rights count as a “pattern of ascription” that “is attested cross-culturally in a multiplicity of sources”¹⁵ — even when the ascription (i.e. the formal assertion that x is magic) and the attestation (i.e. the objective *fact that* some x has been asserted to be magic) call for entirely different concepts and methodologies.

And this is where the second problem arises. A pattern of magicity, we have seen, is a pattern of magicity only if it is explicitly referred to magic or some roughly synonymous term. If not, this pattern will be a pattern of something other than magic. As a consequence, within the framework set up by Otto and Stausberg, a pattern of magicity is never just a pattern of magicity. Owing to this necessity of explicit reference, a pattern of magicity is also a *verbal* pattern, and not just any old pattern made of such and such words, but a strictly *propositional* one:

14. *Ibid.*, 12.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

considered analytically, a “pattern of magicity” may be broken down into a set of *predicate terms* that are attributed to magic as a *subject term*, and if there is any truth in speaking of “patterns of magicity,” everything that may be seen as forming such a pattern must be similarly structured. In other words, to say that a thing is “magic” is to affirm its “magicity,” and this happens by identifying a certain set of attributes that are taken to constitute that magicity. As a result, formulas like “MHAR” (magic as harming others by ritual means), “MOBJ” and “MPLA” (magic as the efficacy of objects or places) or “MMIR” (magic as the possession of miraculous capacities) are shown to be theoretically beguiling and slightly showy translations of simple sentences which say neither more nor less than that “magic is x,” “magic is y,” or “magic does z and causes q.”¹⁶ In the end, therefore, what Otto and Stausberg have to offer is less the new metatheory of magic they purport it to be than a novel taxonomy of magic-referring expressions. It is, to be sure, an elegant solution, but its elegance is sorely vitiated by this lack of theoretical reflexivity. Furthermore, to make matters worse, this second problem compounds the first: if there is no formally consistent criterion by which to distinguish a legitimate pattern from a spurious one, this means by the same token that a true proposition cannot be distinguished from a false one.¹⁷

16. Ibid.

17. One way out of this cul-de-sac is indicated by Kimberly B. Stratton’s essay “Magic Discourse in the Ancient World” in *Defining Magic*. “What gets labelled magic is arbitrary,” Stratton writes, “and depends upon the society in question. Once the label is affixed, however, it enables certain practices to *become* magic by virtue of being regarded as such by members of the society. Magic becomes real by virtue of being conceived” (Stratton, “Magic Discourse,” 246–47). One may recognize here the Foucauldian approach that Stratton has elsewhere brought forcefully to bear on stereotypical representations of magic and witchcraft in European antiquity. See Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 15–18. However, given that the discursive *fiat* by which this transformation is achieved is explicitly a passage from the false statement to the true, the structural distribution of the true and the false remains in place and must be interrogated as such. That, briefly, is what I am trying to do in this part of the essay.

2. Second throw of the die: magic is grammatical

Whether it is true or false, a sentence about magic is just that: a *sentence* about *magic*. Thus, from this perspective at least, the historical and semantical vagueness of “magic” is not the most disastrous of conditions. For what is not vague, or at least is decisively less so, is the logical grammar that governs the *use* of the word. Because there are only a few functions that the word can fulfil in a propositional sentence, and since these functions are in turn bound by rules of logic, they will necessarily limit the ways in which the word may be legitimately used. In other words, “magic,” regardless of the many conflicting patterns in which it can be recognized and recollected, is in this respect neither more nor less vague than any other word that can be used in a grammatically correct sentence. This may be ascertained by looking at the following examples:

a) Magic is poetry.

b) Poetry is magic.

In both sentences, “magic” is evidently a noun. In *a*, it is the subject of which “poetry” is the predicate; in *b*, it is the predicate ascribed to the subject “poetry.” These, however, are not the only forms it can take, as may be seen from the next four samples:

c) There is no magic bullet.

d) It was a magical summer.

e) Magical beliefs are afoot.

f) The pumpkin was magicked into a horse-drawn carriage.

In sentence *c*, “magic” remains a noun: its function is to modify the one that directly follows it. In sentence *d*, it is adjectivized: the “magical” is a quality that may characterize a particular thing. Even there, however, its root form is substantive and requires a precomprehension of the thing denoted: a summer cannot be aptly described as “magical” (or, for that matter, as “sunny”) if the speaker has no conception of what the noun “magic” (or, indeed, “the sun”) denotes. The same applies to *e*, where the adjective functions as a transferred epithet and simply indicates the magical content

of the belief: magical beliefs are beliefs in the real and effective existence of magic (regardless of how “magic” is construed). Finally, in *f*, the word “magic” is transformed into a verb that is, like the adjectives in sentences *d* and *e*, meaningless without a prior understanding of what magic is (such that the ability to “magic” means the capacity to effect a change “as if by magic”). As regards Otto and Stausberg, it should be noted that these grammatical considerations show just how intractable are the problems that they sought to evade. Briefly, their notion of “magicity” (the quality or condition of having “magic”) is easily resolved by observing that it is synonymous or logically equivalent with the adjective “magical.” In turn, this adjective, as has just been seen, has no meaning if it does not refer back to the noun “magic.” As a consequence, therefore, the invention of “magicity” does not solve the problem of “magic” in the least: it only camouflages the latter under a layer of merely seeming precision.

But let us return to the example sentences. In all six cases, magic is a noun that denotes a specific thing. If there is anything vague about these sentences, this vagueness lies in the fact that the thing denoted by the word is not an object at all in any straightforward sense of the term. If this was not evident before, the conclusion becomes inescapable when one pays closer attention to the two functions that the word may have in a propositional sentence:

- 1) As a *subject* term, “magic” refers to an object that is characterized by a finite set of attributes: “magic” is what is *x* but not *y*, or *y* but not *z*, or *x* but not *x*. Here, for example, it denotes the things that sentences *a–f* were respectively seen to presuppose: magic as verbal power in *a*, magic as enchantment in *b*, magic as literal or metaphoric spell in *c*, and so on and so forth.
- 2) As a *predicate* term, “magic” expresses an attribute belonging to another object: poetry, for instance, can be many things, depending on how it is defined, and there are many definitions in which it is characterized by a “magic” of some sort. In this case, a specific interpretation of magic is first selected as salient and then transferred onto the subject of the sentence: the particular “magic” that poetry is said to possess is only one “magic” among many others.

In its first function, magic is *constituted* by the set of properties that are attributed to it. In its second function, magic is *constitutive* of another thing by adding its own properties to those of the thing of which it is said. At first glance, this appears to be a firm and stable distinction. Since “magic” is in both cases a noun, the latter function (magic as constitutive) appears to refer back to the first (magic as constituted). This is because, as was stated above, the possibility of attributing magic to some other object is assumed to depend on a preconception of what “magic” means, or, in other words, of the qualities that constitute “magic” as “magic.” On a closer look, however, the reference to *constitution* reveals this assumption to be more problematic than one might at first be inclined to believe. A preconception, after all, is nothing more than a set of predicative qualities by which we specify the “magic” that we are talking about. And since this specification cannot be done on a whim, by some arbitrary *fiat* of pure stipulation, there must in each case be a *criterion of selection* to which this act of specification is referred. Magic itself, obviously, cannot serve as this criterion. Because “magic itself” cannot be conjured out of thin air, every attempt to define “magic” according to a list of “magical qualities” is a fallacy of the *virtus dormativa* kind: to identify magic by its magical qualities is to identify certain qualities as magical – and to do this is necessarily to fall guilty of circular reasoning, because these qualities must be identified as magical before they can serve as the definition of magic. As a consequence, the criterion can only be sought in the actual thing to which “magic” is attributed. What is magical about poetry, for instance, must be some attribute that actually and verifiably characterizes poetry – not poetry as such, in all its instances, but in this or that poem, in one stanza or a single verse, in the fine mutation of a prosodic pattern.¹⁸ Such attributes, I propose, are best defined as *magic-bearing qualities*: a

18. Ezra Pound, echoing Walter Pater, puts this finely in his early study *The Spirit of Romance*. “Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions. If one have a mind which inclines to magic rather than to science, one will prefer to speak of these equations as spells

quality may be called “magical” if and only if it is able to serve as a qualitative substrate for “magic” (i.e. if and only if its semantic content can be passed over to “magic” as the proper definition of the latter). As may be seen from the litany cited in the previous section, magic is very near – very near, but not all the way – to being parasitic on such qualities: an (apparently) empty term with no (clear) identity of its own, it cannot function (as far as we can tell) without a host.

Whether this characterization is too negative – essentially, rather than merely rhetorically – remains to be seen. Yet, grounded in this way, what is certain is that “magic” finds itself defined by a set of predicates that is selected according to another set of predicates: poetic predicates in the context of poetry, ritualistic in the context of ritual, occulting in the context of the occult, ecstatic in an ecstatic context.¹⁹ This, as we prepare for the next throw of the die, will prove to be decisive for my attempt to grasp the problem of “magic” beyond its dispersal into semantical and historical vagueness. Whenever the word “magic” is used in a sentence, there is an underlying predicate

or incantations; it sounds more arcane, mysterious, recondite. Speaking generally, the spells or equations of ‘classic’ art invoke the beauty of the normal, and spells of ‘romantic’ art are said to invoke the beauty of the unusual” (Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, 14). For Pater’s view on the mixture of strangeness and beauty, see his *Appreciations*, 246–47. Another perspective is offered by Reuven Tsur in *On the Shore of Nothingness*. Tsur draws upon Roman Jakobson in disputing the equation of poetry and magic: “In verbal magic and mysticism, the signifier is frequently indistinguishable from the signified. God, and the name of God, have sometimes the same powers. The sounds of the name of God, and the letters that signify those sounds (e.g., the tetragrammaton), have sometimes the same magic power. In this respect, poetry is diametrically opposed to verbal magic. In a complex cultural situation of human society in which the automatic identification of signifiers with their signifieds may be the source of maladaptive behaviour, the signifiers and signifieds must be properly kept apart. It is here where poetry comes in” (Tsur, *Shore*, 209). Bronislaw Malinowski might not agree: magic, he writes, “seems to stir up in everyone some hidden mental forces, some lingering hopes in the miraculous, some dormant beliefs in man’s mysterious possibilities. Witness to this is the power which the words *magic*, *spell*, *charm*, *to bewitch*, and *to enchant*, possess in poetry, where the inner value of words, the emotional forces which they still release, survive longest and are revealed most clearly” (Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, 51).

19. This is not to say, of course, that magic has only one definition or interpretation in a given context. Contexts are not necessarily cut off from each other, and the qualities that are magic-bearing in one context will often be found to have carried their magic into another.

that bears it. And whenever a sentence mentions “magic,” this mention does something to the magic-bearing predicate. Qualifying the quality to which it is added, it transforms this quality and the thing determined by this quality into something more and something other than it was before: more potent, more beguiling, more efficaciously present than it might otherwise be. This is why its emptiness is not the emptiness of an illusion and its parasitism the parasitism of an error. Or, to be more precise, this is why its emptiness is not simply a pure absence and its parasitism not just a superficial and surreptitious addition. To the contrary: it may well turn out to be the case that “magic” has nothing else to commend itself except this capacity for heightened presence.

3. Third throw of the die: there is always a criterion which decides whether “magic” is attributable to a thing

Magic as capacity for heightened presence? Ludwig Feuerbach, for one, would not abide by such claims. In *The Essence of Christianity*, this ingraspable sense of something *more* – the sense of a thing being itself, but with an added and strange degree of *profundity* – is seized as an opportunity to excoriate religion in general – and “Christian sophistry” in particular – for its obfuscatory and obscurantist tendencies. Near the beginning of a chapter that deals with the contradiction inherent in the divine nature – namely, that God is at once universal and personal, infinite and individual – we find this striking paragraph:

A peculiarly characteristic artifice and pretext of Christian sophistry is the doctrine of the unsearchableness, the incomprehensibility of the divine nature. But, as will be shown, the secret of this incomprehensibility is nothing further than that a known quality is made into an unknown one, a natural quality into a supernatural, i.e., an unnatural one, so as to produce the appearance, the illusion, that the divine nature is different from the human, and is eo ipso an incomprehensible one.²⁰

20. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 212.

In the previous paragraph, having first stated that the “essence of religion is the immediate, involuntary, unconscious contemplation of the human nature as another, a distinct nature,” Feuerbach observes that this “projected image of human nature,” as it is taken up as the object of theological reflection, “becomes an inexhaustible mine of falsehoods, illusions, contradictions, and sophisms.”²¹ Against this relentlessly critical background, the passage quoted above functions as a transition to another discussion, lengthier and yet more acerbic than the one preceding it, that deals with the properly *imaginary* quality of divine incomprehensibility. By treating it as imaginary, of course, Feuerbach does not mean that incomprehensibility should be seen as a sign and a spur for profounder learning, as Friedrich Schlegel argued in one of his fragments some four decades previously: that would be much too romantic, much too ironic for his purposes.²² Rather, his point is to show that the idea of an inscrutable God emerges from eminently scrutable elements that are rendered mysterious and inhuman only by the spontaneous removal of everything that determines them as human: finitude, dependence, measure. Furthermore, because this removal is indeed spontaneous — or, in Feuerbach’s terms, “immediate,” “involuntary,” and “unconscious” — it lends itself effortlessly to the kind of dismantling that Feuerbach is engaged in. “In the truly religious sense,” he writes in the next paragraph, “incomprehensibility is not the dead full stop which reflection places wherever understanding deserts it, but a *pathetic note of exclamation* marking the impression which the imagination makes on the feelings.”²³ This association of feeling and imagination explains why, for Feuerbach, “the incomprehensibility of God has only the significance of an impassioned expression.”²⁴ What takes us by surprise, Feuerbach argues, elicits from us the exclamation that it is “incredible” and “beyond conception,” and since these exclamations are thoroughly

21. *Ibid.*, 211–12.

22. Schlegel, *Fragments*, 257–71.

23. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 212, my emphasis.

24. *Ibid.*

imbued with a pathetic note, a note of *pathos*, the incomprehensibility that is ascribed to God turns out to be nothing other than the imaginatively exaggerated and intellectually hyperbolized form of a quintessentially human feeling. For the human imagination, many things feel incredible and beyond conception; yet God is that which feels *absolutely* incredible and beyond *all* conception.

This is what Feuerbach means when he says of the imagination that it is “the original organ of religion.”²⁵ Defining this faculty as “the limitless activity of the senses” and the nature of God as “the nature of the imagination unfolded, made objective,”²⁶ Feuerbach describes religion as the *intellectual infinitization of a finite feeling*. In religion, everything that limits the imagination is negated, and the imagination, thus freed from the dross of human finitude, is granted to a God that *feels* infinite and therefore *is* infinite. Here, the parallels to my argument as I have developed it thus far become evident, and they are nowhere more so than in the specific act by which, as Feuerbach writes, “a known quality is made into an unknown one, a natural quality into a supernatural, *i.e.* an unnatural one.”²⁷ From a strictly formal perspective, what this act of imagination comes to effect is nothing other than the transformation of a *human quality* into a *God-bearing quality*; furthermore, because this formal efficacy does not pass unnoticed by Feuerbach, he is able to redefine the language of religion, and specifically of theology, as tantamount to a set of God-referring expressions. Or, more precisely, a set of *God-referring pathetic exclamations*.

But that is not the end of the matter. If imagination is the organ of religion, it is equally the organ of magic. Yet magic and religion are not the same, which is why it remains to be asked how this organ of emotional infinitization works in this somewhat shadowier realm.

This, of course, is a nearly intractable question. However, though answers are hard to find, they are, happily, not altogether nonexistent: for, by a stroke of luck, if not of magic, it is precisely this that Jean-Paul Sartre comes to elucidate,

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

without exactly intending to, in his early essay *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. In this short work, which gives an overview of then-current psychological theories of emotion before supplementing them with a relatively detailed phenomenological analysis, Sartre deploys the notion of magic in a way that makes up in conceptual inventiveness what it lacks in descriptive accuracy.²⁸ What this inventiveness consists in will be dealt with shortly. On the latter score, it should be noted here that its shortcomings are glaring indeed, and apart from a brief mention in Randall Styers’s landmark book *Making Magic*, which examines the way in which “magic” is posited as the counterpart to a putatively rational “modernity,” it is no surprise that the ideas put forward in the essay have passed undiscussed by scholars of the subject.²⁹ This choice snippet, quoted by Styers in a different translation, gives a good idea of where Sartre is coming from:

The magical, as Alain says, is “the mind crawling among things”; that is, an irrational synthesis of spontaneity and passivity. It is an inert activity, a consciousness rendered passive. But it is precisely in that form that others appear to us, and this, not because of our positions in relation to them, nor in consequence of our passions, but by essential necessity; ... It follows that man is always a sorcerer to man and the social world is primarily magical. Not that it is impossible to take a deterministic view of the inter-psychological world or to build rational superstructures upon it. But then it is those structures

28. By “descriptive accuracy,” I simply mean the extent to which Sartre’s concept of magic can be reconciled with everything that historical and empirical investigation has been able to say about “magic” – in other words with Otto and Stausberg’s “patterns of magicity” (and it is, among other things, merely one pattern among others). Furthermore, it should be noted that Sartre’s theory of magic is fundamentally a theory of the imagination and as such would be able to do without the former concept. (On the equivalence that Sartre draws between the magical and the imaginary, see O’Shiel, “Sartre’s Magical Being.”) In the following reflections, what I am aiming at, ultimately, is the *deconstruction* of Sartre’s theory of the emotions through its appeal to the concept of magic. In other words, the argument will consist, to quote Jacques Derrida, “in making appear – in each alleged system, in each self-interpretation of and by a system – a force of dislocation, a limit in the totalization, a limit in the movement of syllogistic synthesis” (Derrida & Ferraris, *A Taste for The Secret*, 4). As will be seen, magic is precisely what exceeds Sartre’s system, his phenomenological theory of the emotions, even as it gives this theory the *force* that it needs.

29. Styers, *Making Magic*, 179.

that are ephemeral and unstable, it is they that crumble away as soon as the magical aspect of faces, gestures and the human situations becomes too vivid. And what happens then, when the superstructures laboriously built up by the reason disintegrate, and man finds himself suddenly plunged back into the original magic? That is easily predicted; the consciousness seizes upon the magic as magic, and lives it vividly as such.³⁰

“Crawling,” “passivity,” “inertia”: that would seem to say it all. For a scholar of magic, claims such as these are debatable at best, and their sole merit, if merit there is, bears solely on the structure of emotional experience that the essay investigates.

Or does it? Note, at the end of the quotation, these two crucial expressions: *magic as magic*, *magic as such*. I drew your attention to these objectifying expressions in the introduction and will do so later on. Before that, however, let us read what Sartre writes only a couple of pages earlier:

Indeed, there is a world of emotion. All emotions have this in common, that they evoke the appearance of a world, cruel, terrible, bleak, joyful, etc., but in which the relations of things to consciousness are always and exclusively magical. We have to speak of a world of emotion as one speaks of a world of dreams or of worlds of madness. A world — that means individual syntheses in mutual relations and possessing *qualities*.... We are living, emotively, a quality that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction.³¹

In the world of emotion, then, magic is found in *qualities*. In other words, there is no need to add any magic to a quality. Emotion itself, for Sartre, is nothing other than a magical relation to a quality, and if Sartre’s argument holds, we may propose, as a hypothesis, that the converse is also true: *magic is nothing other than an emotional relation to a quality*.

But emotional in what sense? The answer to this question entails a decisive turn. Thus far, I have adduced my broader argument only abstractly and without any certainty that it might hold true of any given object. Yet Sartre’s account changes all this. There, the word “magic” does not refer to yet another “pattern of magicity.” Nor, for that matter, does the essay deal with a phenomenon that

30. Sartre, *Sketch*, 56–57.

31. *Ibid.*, 53–55.

can vaguely be called “magical.” Rather, the word “magic” is used there, as it is elsewhere in Sartre’s work, because it accurately describes the phenomenon that Sartre is trying to understand: when he says that the magical is “an irrational synthesis of spontaneity and passivity,” when he describes it as “an inert activity, a consciousness rendered passive,” this passivity is not primarily a qualitative state, although it is that too, but first and foremost it is the state of being an object *for the other*, which, in this case, is not another consciousness, another subject, but rather a quality “that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction.” For this reason, despite the connection that scholars and thinkers like Malinowski or Collingwood have drawn between magic and emotion,³² what Sartre is grappling with here is in fact something altogether different: of all the shorthands available to him, “magic” is the one that best expresses a situation in which both mind and world are gripped and transformed by a power that is wholly other to either of them.

The implications of this are of paramount importance. For, even if Sartre’s broader description of magic is disputed, it nonetheless satisfies, concretely and materially, the two conditions that have been elaborated in the two preceding sections. Formalized, they are as follows:

- 1) A magic-referring expression is true only where it refers to a magic-bearing quality: the latter is the criterion of the former.
- 2) Magic cannot be defined by reference to putatively “magical” qualities: when used in a true proposition, the word indicates only that an identifiable quality has been transformed into a magic-bearing quality.

Together, these conditions must be understood as stating that a definition of

32. In an earlier part of the essay, Sartre comes close to Malinowski’s view that the function of magic is the management of emotion (cf. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, 51–55). From a related perspective, R. G. Collingwood notes in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* that the perception of a magical connection between objects is emotionally motivated (Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment*, 196–207). More recently, Giorgio Agamben has made the unexpected argument – which is the kind of argument that he prefers to make – that magic consists in the felicitous knowledge of a thing’s secret name (Agamben, *Profanations*, 19–22).

magic is always *specific to its object*: a true definition of magic for x is not necessarily true for y or z (i.e. where x = emotion, y = physics, and z = poetry). Furthermore, it must be noted that a definition may be simultaneously true for more than one class of objects (e.g. for emotion and poetry), whereas for others (e.g. physics), there is and cannot be a true definition of magic (in other words, the laws of physics preclude, in domains governed by these laws, the existence of a *physical* magic). Bearing this in mind, the single merit of Sartre’s essay is that it succeeds in laying out the *conditions of truth* for the definition of magic that it proposes: judged to be true, a given description is believed to meet these conditions; judged to be false, it does not. Because of this, and strictly within these theoretical bounds, it is a completely immaterial question whether Sartre’s theory is true or false either partly (i.e. for some aspect of its object) or as a whole (i.e. for the object in all its aspects). Whether it stands or falls, it stands or falls according to its own criterion, and what matters is that such a criterion can be asserted.

But what is this criterion? Where is it found? And to what extent is Sartre aware of its criterial quality? Here, we must return to the two phrases, the two philosophemes, that I evoked twice above: “magic as magic” and “magic as such” (“the consciousness seizes upon the magic as magic, and lives it vividly as such”³³). The most important thing to be observed about these phrases is that they function in Sartre’s analysis as phrases of *objectification*: through them, the active attention of the theorist passes over to the thing itself. Yet another question immediately follows: *from what* does the attention of the theorist pass over to the thing itself? The answer takes time to formulate, and we must begin with what Sartre says immediately after the sentence just quoted. “The categories ‘suspicious’ and ‘disquieting,’ etc.,” Sartre writes, “designate the magical, in so far as it is being lived by consciousness or tempting consciousness to live it.”³⁴ *The magical*: another formula of objectification, now designated by emotional categories

33. Sartre, *Sketch*, 57.

34. *Ibid.*

such as the two he mentions. But let us keep reading. Halfway through the next paragraph, the answer gains additional depth: there is a shift from the internal to the external that further blurs the boundary between emotion and object. “Consciousness,” Sartre writes, taking as his example the image of a staring face that incites terror, “plunged into this magic world drags the body with it in as much as the body is belief and the consciousness believes in it. The behaviour which gives its meaning to the emotion is no longer *our* behaviour; it is the expression of the face and the movements of the body of the other being, which make up a synthetic whole with the upheaval in our own organism.”³⁵ Note these last words: *a synthetic whole with the upheaval in our own organism*. What magic is, then, prior to its objectification *as* magic, is a synthesis which involves the external dimension *in* the internal and the internal *in* the external: when the subjective consciousness is an object for the other, the other is thereby brought into the innermost sphere of the subject, into the heart of its intimacy with itself, and makes it quake with an intensity of affect that no natural occurrence can incite. And this happens because *the body believes* in the magically transformed quality.

This, I feel, is where the answer to the question posed above begins to gain real momentum. Returning to the passage quoted above, now reading it at greater length, what can be found there is a point of upheaval that is as emotional as it is *philosophical*: it is one in which the author – the *abstract organism* without which no such thing as the *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* would exist – forms a synthetic whole with the object of his discourse.

Indeed, there is a world of emotion. All emotions have this in common, that they evoke the appearance of a world, cruel, terrible, bleak, joyful, etc., but in which the relations of things to consciousness are always and exclusively magical. We have to speak of a world of emotion as one speaks of a world of dreams or of worlds of madness. A world – that means individual syntheses in mutual relations and possessing qualities. But no quality is conferred upon an object without passing over into the infinite. This grey, for instance, represents the units of an infinity of real and possi-

35. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

ble *abschattungen*, some of which will be grey-green, some grey seen in a certain light, black, etc. Similarly, the qualities that emotion confers upon the object and upon the world, it confers upon them *ad aeternum*. True, when I suddenly conceive an object to be horrible I do not explicitly affirm that it will remain horrible for eternity. But the mere affirmation of horribleness as a substantial quality of the object is already, in itself, a passage to the infinite. The horrible is now in the thing, at the heart of it, is its emotive texture, is constitutive of it. Thus, during emotion an overwhelming and definitive quality of the thing makes its appearance. And that is what transcends and maintains our emotion. Horribleness is not only the present state of the thing, it is a menace for the future, it is a revelation about the meaning of the world. The “horrible” means indeed that horribleness is a substantial quality, that there is horribleness in the world. Thus, in every emotion, a multitude of affective protentions extends into the future and presents it in an emotional light. We are living, emotively, a quality that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction. Immediately, the emotion is lifted out of itself and transcends itself; it is no ordinary episode of our daily life, but an intuition of the absolute.³⁶

My aim in the preceding discussion has been to discover the criterion by which Sartre’s notion of magic may be judged either true or false. In searching for it, I noted that Sartre passes at a key juncture of his discussion from an unobjectified magic to an objectified magic expressed in the formulas “magic as magic,” “magic as such,” and “the magical.” Finding it imperative not to judge in advance what that unobjectified magic might be, I drew several interconnected quotations from Sartre’s essay in order to locate the specifically argumentative place, the architectonic rather than simply textual locus, where that passage occurs and Sartre finds it possible to begin speaking of “magic as magic,” of “magic as such,” of “the magical.” Reading the citation above, we may see that it is here that this locus is found, in this passage where Sartre affirms that there is horribleness in the world, and it is found as having stared us in the face all the time: in describing emotion as magical, in the very *act* of transforming emotion into magic, Sartre’s discourse enters into the emotional structure it describes

36. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

— and thereby undergoes the same magical transformation. There is, Sartre says, horribleness in the world, and while another philosopher might conclude from this that subjectively felt qualities are just as real as objectively material qualities, Sartre goes farther, far beyond what his phenomenology of emotion would strictly require, and transforms the merest apprehension of a quality into a “passage to the infinite,” a “menace for the future” and a “revelation about the meaning of the world,” an “intuition of the absolute.” The spontaneous hyperbole of these phrases is no aberration: what it proves is that the description is also a self-description, the theory also a theorization of itself, the author not only the author but also the prime example of the structure that he is disclosing. And, most importantly, the criterion of magic a criterion *for itself as magical*. For when Sartre writes that “[w]e are living, emotively, a quality that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction,”³⁷ what he himself is living emotively is the very criteriality of the criterial quality: what penetrates into him, what he is suffering, what surrounds him in every direction is the quality of *essentiality*, of *infinitude* and *plenitude*, the quality of a thing being infinitely itself — which, in the theory of the emotions that is coming into being as it is being written, is not only the criterion by which a thing is determined as magical, but, more directly and profoundly, the criterion by which the magical is revealed *to the author of the theory* as magical. Thus, when he adds that “[i]mmediately, the emotion is lifted out of itself and transcends itself; it is no ordinary episode of our daily life, but an intuition of the absolute,”³⁸ what happens is that this emotional description of emotion, lifted out of itself by virtue of its philosophical *pathos*, ceases to be an ordinary episode of philosophical discourse and becomes instead *infinitely* itself. Transformed into an “act of consciousness which destroys all the structures of the world that might dispel the magic and reduce the event to reasonable proportions,”³⁹ it is no longer a

37. *Ibid.*, 54.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 59.

statement about emotion as an intuition of the absolute; rather, having become *an absolute intuition about the intuition of the absolute*, it is transformed into a magical phrase about magic. And this for reasons internal to philosophy, which, when it believes itself to have attained this state of pure seeing, cannot but undergo in a properly philosophical mode the “upheaval in our own organism”⁴⁰ that we have seen Sartre and Feuerbach define respectively as “the return of consciousness to the magical attitude”⁴¹ and the “peculiarly characteristic artifice and pretext”⁴² of the religious imagination: *when the criterion is revealed as infinitely criterial, the definite becomes infinitely definite, and the infinitely definite, passing infinitely beyond the powers of philosophical definition, confronts the philosophizing consciousness with the boundlessness of the infinitely other*. The infinite otherness of the infinite criterion: that is the magic proper to philosophy, the magic upon which philosophy both founds itself and founders, rendering unthinkable the very thing that it needs in order to think anything at all.

Such is the final throw of the die: a throw that suspends the difference between magic and philosophy, between the criterion of magic and the criterion as magic, and, consequently, between the definition of magic and the magic of definition. No longer the third throw but rather a fourth that splits off from it, not in fact a throw at all but rather the fourth fall of the thrice thrown die, it is one that resists and defies formalization. One, in other words, that demands that we leave it where it fell, in its scattered and discarded state, hoping only that it may one day be found by someone for whom it is not only an object *of* thought but rather a portent *for* it.

But the die has not fallen yet. Not, at least, before we ask the following questions: What does this entail for the question of defining magic? What should a scholar of magic conclude from this? What, in short, are we to make of this transformation? Should one say, in imitation of Feuerbach, that Sartre’s discourse is from this point onwards “an inexhaustible mine of falsehoods,

40. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

41. *Ibid.*, 61.

42. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 212.

illusions, contradictions, and sophisms”?⁴³ Or should one follow Sartre himself as he scales down from these hyperbolic heights and say with him that magic is always *of* the Other and thereby opposed to the responsibly existing Self? That, in other words, “man is always a sorcerer to man and the social world is primarily magical”?⁴⁴ Not necessarily, for there is a third alternative, or rather a second alternative to the reductive one that both Sartre and Feuerbach exemplify, and it is one that consists precisely in not *reducing* magic from rational thought but rather in *inducing* it. Here, before proceeding to the concluding section of this essay, I will leave the last word to Roger Caillois, founding member with Georges Bataille of the Collège de Sociologie and onetime interlocutor of André Breton, who writes in an essay from 1936:

[T]he mind has always grappled with extraordinarily disturbing questions that it seems driven to resolve. *There is, in man, a full mantle of shadow that spreads its nocturnal empire over most of his emotional reactions and imaginative processes, and his being cannot stop struggling with this darkness for an instant.* Man’s stubborn curiosity is immediately drawn to these mysteries, which so strangely border on his fully conscious state. He rightly feels that any form of knowledge that denies them credence and attention, that deliberately rejects or neglects them out of indifference, thus irremediably betrays its own purpose. When positivism excluded these emotive obstacles from methodical research, they became the exclusive monopoly of emotional and sentimental forces that were unable to control them and, instead, found satisfaction in making them divine.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The quaint little fiction that opened this essay was written in order to demonstrate vividly the *idée reçue* that magic is too vague and polyvalent a term to admit of a rigorous theoretical definition. If the argument made in the preceding pages is at all successful, it will have effectively rewritten the story by reconfiguring the polyvalence of the term and thereby dissolving the vagueness

43. *Ibid.*, 212.

44. Sartre, *Sketch*, 56. See also Julie Van der Wielen, “The Magic of the Other,” 72–73.

45. Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, 133–34.

that was assumed to surround it. In the first part of the essay, I showed that all sentences in which the word “magic” is used must be examined as propositional sentences consisting of a subject term and a predicate term. In the second part, I demonstrated that all judgements concerning “magic” must be referred to that “magic-bearing” predicate by which a given thing is determined as “magical.” In the third and final part, I argued that the truth of a proposition containing a magic-bearing predicate is always specific to a class of objects from which the definition of “magic” is derived. In other words, magic is definable for any class of objects in which it refers back to a magic-bearing predicate; as a consequence, a magic-referring expression is always either true or false for the class of objects to which it refers.

Everything up to this point was demonstrable in a straightforwardly analytical fashion. It was only with the fourth throw of the die – or, as I said above, with the fourth fall of the thrice thrown die – that my argument shouldered the burden of phenomenological proof. Which is the same as shouldering the “full mantle of shadow” of which Caillois speaks. There, following Sartre, I argued that there is no magic without emotion. By this, however, I did not mean that magic is a mere function of our internal and subjective states. Indeed what was seen is that the contrary is true. It is of a synthetic whole that Sartre speaks, and it belongs to this synthetic whole that it should be a strange admixture or interweaving of subject and object: finding itself as an object *for* the other, the subjective consciousness is captive *to* the other, and, rendered passive in and by this captivity, finds itself unable to react by any other than emotional – magical – means. A final quotation from Sartre:

[I]n a general way, areas form themselves around me out of which the horrible makes itself felt. For the horrible is *not possible* in the deterministic world of tools. The horrible can appear only in a world which is such that all the things existing in it are magical by nature, and the only defences against them are magical. This is what we experience often enough in the universe of dreams, where doors, locks and walls are no protection against the threats of robbers or wild animals for they are all grasped in one and the same act of horror. And since the act which is to disarm them is the same as that which is creating

them, we see the assassins passing through doors and walls; we press the trigger of our revolver in vain, no shot goes off. In a word, to experience any object as horrible, is to see it against the background of a world which reveals itself as *already* horrible.⁴⁶

What is important to note here is that this is also *empirically* true: to speak of magic is to speak of a world that *has revealed itself* as already magical. Not to the philosopher or researcher, but to someone, anyone in general, to whom we owe the very possibility of having magic as an object of scholarly research. Yet this does not mean that scholarly research is the only way to repay this debt. To the contrary: what the *facticity* of magic properly entails for the study of magic — what follows, in other words, from the fact that something like a belief in magic has *taken place in the world* — is the obligation *never to defer to existing traditions and practices of magic*. Not because we can do without them, for it is evident that we cannot, but rather because this attitude of deference may so easily derail the inquiry, making it stray from the path of *thinking* into the thicket of the *given*. Yes, it is absolutely necessary that magic must be discovered before it can be studied. But if we wish to avoid losing it to the twin extremes of denied essentialism and enforced relativism, it must be discovered *as magic* wherever and in whatever form it is found. And this means that it must be found *philosophically*.

That this creates problems for philosophy itself is no disaster. Or, if it is, this disaster is where all the riches lie. For what this philosophical disaster means is that the *recognition* of magic — the event in which a philosophizing subject is prompted to utter a *declarative statement* about magic — may suffice to grant magic the ontological weight that philosophical reason would rather deny it. And to grant magic any ontological weight at all is to cease speaking in purely intellectual terms of something that cannot be spoken of in purely intellectual terms. That is what happened to Sartre, albeit briefly, when he admitted magic into his ontology: in that moment of philosophical hyperbole, of an all but unavowable mysticism, he put one toe over the threshold, slipped a fingertip into the

46. Sartre, *Sketch*, 59–60.

parting of the veil, sent an unformed wish out into the realm of transcendental essences. Not because he told the truth about magic, for it is questionable whether there can be any such thing, but rather because he was able to say with conviction that magic *is*, that *something* is magic, that magic *works* in such and such a way and is *defined* by such and such qualities. For, having given such a definition, and having given it with conviction, he was then permitted entry into it — magically, as it were — and found it at work in places where no objective theory of magic would have been able to discern it. And we, if we choose to follow this strand in his thought rather than the other, may widen the orbit of his thought, finding instances of magic in the most unexpected places — for example among insects.

Insects? To understand this, begin by recalling to mind the last extended quotation from Sartre: a magical world is one from whose magical relations the mind cannot extricate itself by any other than magical means. Then, turning again to Roger Caillois, who argues in his 1937 essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” that mimetic insects *charm themselves into believing* that they are what they are mimicking, consider the following observation. “This tendency, whose universality thus becomes hard to deny,” Caillois writes, referring, by way of Frazer’s principles of contagion and similarity, to the propensity of living beings to imitate the things and circumstances that environ them,

might have been the determining force behind the current morphology of mimetic insects, at a time when their body was more plastic than it is today (as we must anyhow assume, given the fact of transformationism). Mimicry could then accurately be defined as an *incantation frozen at its high point* and that has caught the sorcerer in his own trap. Let no one call it sheer madness to attribute magic to insects: this novel use of terms should not hide the utter simplicity of the matter itself. *Prestige-magic* and *fascination*: what else should we call the phenomena that were all grouped under the very category of mimicry? ...

In any event, resorting to the explanatory claim that magic always tends to seek out resemblance simply provides us with an initial approximation, as this too must be accounted for in turn. The search for similarity presents itself as a means, if not as an intermediary. It seems that the goal is indeed to *become assimilated into the environment*. And in this respect, in-

stinct completes the work of morphology: the *Kallima* symmetrically aligns itself with a real leaf, its lower wing appendage in the spot that a real leaf stalk would occupy. The *Oxydia* attaches itself perpendicularly to the tip of a branch, for the marks imitating the median vein require it to do so. The Brazilian *Cholia* butterflies settle in a row on little stalks so as to form bellflowers like those on lily of the valley sprigs, for example.⁴⁷

An incantation frozen at its high point and that has caught the sorcerer in his own trap: such is the philosophical magic of which I have tried to give an example here. To assure yourself of this, of the veracity of this description, take another look at the die you have found and spent the last few hours deciphering. If you are still certain that a die is what it is, I congratulate you on the hardness of your convictions: mine have long since wavered.

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47. Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, 98–99.

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