

Magic in Life and Evolution

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We're all hard-wired for magic

In the beginning, there was a noise in the bush. Our ancestors were sitting around a campfire, huddled in a small group. Half of them thought the noise came from a predator, a huge animal with sharp teeth ready to attack. They leapt up from the fire and ran for their lives.

The other half stuck around to analyze the situation. "Maybe it's a predator or maybe it's just the wind in the trees."

Wind or predator? We don't know, but we do know that the people who ran away survived. They lived to reproduce and pass their genes on to their children and their children's children and so on down to us. Even now, we still get nervous when we hear a noise in the dark.

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Perhaps these "just so" stories should come with a label: "Not for literal consumption. For illustrative purposes only."

The stories may be shaky, but they illustrate a real problem. Why do some human behaviors and psychological traits persist across time and culture even though they seem harmful or pointless? Why do we humans have compassion, self-sacrifice, infanticide, empathy, and common standards of beauty?

Questions like these led to the science of evolutionary psychology. Proponents claim that puzzling traits like self-sacrifice make sense as evolutionary adaptations—they may not do much for contemporary individuals, but they had survival value for our ancient ancestors. They may have outlived their usefulness, but they're still there in our DNA and in our minds.

Take the campfire story above. The trait in question is known to psychologists as "agent detection," the ability of humans to detect other beings with a conscious purpose. Our minds detect agents willy-nilly. We do it when we're in the presence of other people and we do it with inanimate objects.

I'm not the first person to suggest that agent detection is a basic part of religion and magic. I doubt it's the whole story, but I think that you could build an evolutionary model of magic from a collection of traits. Perhaps these four:

- Detecting agents where there are none
- Detecting patterns where there are none
- Mistaking correlation for causality
- Valuing stories over evidence

These traits may have outlived their evolutionary purpose, but they're buried deep within us and they're not going anywhere. They shape our experience and drive our behavior relentlessly whether we like it or not.

The best we can do, I think, is to understand magic for what it is and find a graceful way to live with it. Ironically, skeptics and believers often fail at this task for similar reasons. They take magic at face value. They witness the evolutionary spectacle of faces in the clouds and voices in the wind. One group snickers in contempt and the other asks the wind for advice.

Personally, I'm a rational materialist. I also read Tarot cards. I don't believe that Tarot cards reveal the future or give me information that I couldn't obtain through ordinary channels. I do Tarot *because* I'm a rationalist, because I need help connecting with the powerful, irrational forces flowing deep inside me.

Everybody's path is different. At some point, though, I think you have to bite the bullet and go native.

We're all hard-wired for magic.

You are the first line of defense against your own experience

On the surface, evolutionary psych looks pretty grim. We pride ourselves on individuality and free will, but many of our choices and behaviors are determined genetically with mathematical precision and little wiggle room. For all our technological progress, human nature hasn't changed much since it developed hundreds of thousands of years ago in Africa. Our minds pump out beliefs and emotions that were great for coping with saber-tooth cats but now cause us no end of trouble.

Given the fix we're in, it's not surprising that some people who study the subject speak of evolution as a kind of evil force. It bears a resemblance to the Christian devil—a deceiver who plants lies in our minds and self-destruction in our hearts. You can also look at it from an Eastern perspective:

maya, (Sanskrit: “wizardry,” or “illusion”), a fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy... Maya originally denoted the power of wizardry with which a god can make human beings believe in what turns out to be an illusion; by extension it later came to mean the powerful force that creates the cosmic illusion that the phenomenal world is real. ...

– Encyclopedia Britannica

Buddha and the ancient sages weren't talking about genetics when they described the world as an illusion. The concept of *maya* fits the modern evolutionary view, though.

What else would you need to create an all-consuming illusion? A million years of natural selection programmed our minds to see cause and effect in random chaos. We detect patterns where there are none. We detect conscious agents where none exist. Our experience seems totally real, of course, but that solid sense of reality is also generated by the mind.

We escaped the predators in Africa and wound up trapped in a state of enchantment, permanent tourists wandering bug-eyed through a Disney World of cognitive errors.

It looks bad. However, if evolutionary science can show us the problem, perhaps it can also help us find a solution.

Once I understood that we're all stuck with the same lousy programming, I found it liberating. For example, I used to get really angry about the widespread acceptance of unscientific beliefs. You've probably seen the data—46% of Americans believe that God created humans less than 10,000 years ago. 41% believe in ESP. 20% believe that vaccines cause autism.

I used to think that people who believe those things must be clueless or duped. Now I think they believe those things because they're human beings. It bears repeating: we're all hard-wired for magic.

What's more, since belief in magic is tied to our survival instincts, it's almost impossible to resist. Over the years, I've tried to offer alternative explanations to people who believe they have psychic powers or miraculous healing abilities. The response is often something like "I know what happened because I saw it myself and you can't tell me that what I saw is wrong."

There's not much you can say to make a person question his or her bedrock experience. It's screwed in as tight as can be. That doesn't mean that we should give a pass to foolish ideas, however, especially in dangerous cases like vaccine denial.

Perhaps, when this situation comes up again, I'll emphasize that I don't doubt the experience in question. It's as real as anything to the person who had it. Instead, we should doubt experience itself. It just isn't reliable. Mine isn't. Yours isn't. Evolution is always out to trip us up and we must be vigilant.

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The problem of living with magic

Magic, like love, will find you. You can hide. You can scoff. Resistance is futile.

At the very least, you'll be on the receiving end of other people's magic. It might be a friend who bugs you about your horoscope or your Representative in Congress who believes in Noah's Ark and votes accordingly.

If the believers don't get you, your own brain will. Magic can creep out at any moment and grab you with prophetic dreams or flying saucers. Since the magic within you is the strongest, it's also the most convincing and the hardest to resist.

We're stuck with magic like we are with a million other evolutionary relics from jealousy to the appendix. The problem is not how to get rid of it—we can't and, if we could, we wouldn't be human beings any more—the problem is how to live with it.

Common sense advises preparation and familiarity, even for skeptics. That way, when magic shows up, it won't take you by surprise and sweep you away. It's also good to bring a map of the territory showing well-marked hazards.

The biggest peril may be literalism, the trap of taking unusual experiences at face value. If you're too quick to accept your own experience, you may believe that you really are reading minds or seeing the future.

The boundaries of the danger zone are pretty clear. People who claim to have information or abilities that aren't available to everyone else through ordinary means have left the realm of magic and crossed over into the occult. It's one thing if the Tarot cards say that you can find true love; it's something else if they say that you can levitate.

Evolution has us in an awful plight. If we ignore magic or pretend that it doesn't exist, we're shutting the door on a big part of human experience. On the other hand, if we go native and embrace magic, we run the risk of occult delusion. We need a safe path through the horns of the dilemma.

I cautiously recommend meditation to people who want to dip their toes in the waters of the inner abyss. Meditation—along with prayer, ritual, fasting, psychedelics, ecstatic dance, and lots of other techniques—clears the mind and lets in the beauty and wonder of the universe.

Meditation is about as innocuous as it gets, but there's no guarantee. My old meditation group started with twenty minutes twice a day and ended with a plan to transform the world into a global theocracy.

The sad part is that a lot of people need meditation. They're stressed out and hungry for a spiritual life, but they look at the shenanigans of meditation teachers and they sensibly flee in the opposite direction.

I'm not sure if there's any good answer to the problem of living with magic, but I think that it makes sense to look at case studies of groups and individuals who explored the magical depths of human psychology and returned in triumph or tragedy. After two generations of the New Age, there are plenty of wise men and women who learned from their mistakes. They have a lot to offer.

I believe that these questions will become more important as our society loosens up and evolves toward enlightenment. For now, I'd like to pass on the two best pieces of advice I ever received:

Let love be your guide, and keep your crap detector turned up on high.

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