

Review of: "Re-calling Magical Thinking: Different, yet Connected Views on Magical Thinking"

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Professor Qamar's article provides an excellent introduction to the scholarship on magical thinking. Beginning with Arad Ayala's definition—"...the interpreting [of] two closely occurring events as though one caused the other, without any concern for the causal link" (Ayala, 1996, p. 16)—the author elaborates on other important scholarship that tries to locate the origin of this kind of thinking, why it is successful, and to some degree its functionality. The conceptualization of magical thinking as a transfer of energy or information in the real world, as simply the result of their similarity or contiguity in time or space (Zuzne and Jones 1989, p.13; full citation missing), also helps capture the essence of magical thinking. Magical thinking fills a gap in our understanding where the causality of events cannot be explained in terms of known causal powers operating in the world. Something must have caused the phenomenon; it must be explained to be comprehensible in order to take effective meliorative action or, simply, settle one's mind.

Professor Qamar next explores various explanations of how such magical thinking is constructed. Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin explain it in terms of sympathetic magic with three principles: the law of similarity, the law of opposites, and the law of contagion (Nemeroff and Rozin, 2000). Carl Jung's use of synchronicity as an acausal connecting principle is also discussed (Jung, 1952). But the real takeaway is Qamar's observation that in the absence of evident causal connections between two unrelated events, such explanations must adopt some "illogical" and "irrational" thinking. Qamar notes that such thinking occurs in children, so-called primitive cultures, and unreasoned belief, but observes that such thinking goes on in technologically advanced societies and cultures as well (Qamar, 2023, p. 3/8).

Professor Qamar provides a useful diagram of different, but connected, views of magical thinking. The diagram is a very effective visual summary of the views Professor Qamar discusses and notes their interconnected quality. Then Professor Qamar describes Jean Piaget's and James Frazier's views on magical thinking. I think it is important that Professor Qamar focuses on Frazier's observation that magical thinking misconstrues the particular (or real) laws that govern an observed sequence of events. The process is similar to the way science is conducted, but the operational causal forces are replaced by magical thinking of one sort or another. This sets the stage for Professor Qamar's argument that magical thinking is a normal mode of thinking.

In Professor Qamar's conclusion, he notes that during the COVID-19 crisis period, in which we are still functioning, we all engaged in magical thinking when the nature and mode of transmission of the virus were completely unknown. We engaged in activities that were based on prior causal experiences with viruses, but we were really guessing that the same causality was at work. As we began to understand the actual causal processes at work, we assessed and modified our

behavior. This is neither irrational nor illogical when confronted with such circumstances.

Professor Qamar's conclusion that magical thinking persists, is pervasive, and is normal in modern advanced technological societies is convincing. If I were to recommend anything, it would be to note that magical thinking is and always has been pervasive in science. When we have a gap in our understanding, we create a term or concept to stand in for that part of our explanation. Dark matter and dark energy are terms that refer to the energy and mass that must be in the universe but that we cannot detect, and physicists "know" they must be there. Equilibrium is used in mainstream economics to describe static price stability in markets as the result of laws of supply and demand, which are unobservable at a point in time. Economists know markets exhibit some degree of price stability on occasion, but the above characterization is simply magical thinking. Both physicists and economists are not content with such causal explanations and are, no doubt, working deliberately to improve their understanding of the causality of the phenomena they observe. There is a great deal of cultural analysis that needs to be done to clarify the vast amount of magical thinking in modern society and that is not "formulations that characterize primitive, infantile, or neurotic thinking," as argued by Frazer (Qamar, 2023, p.6/8). Instead, magical thinking is an important part of the creative aspect of the scientific process for continuously improving our understanding of the causal forces operating in the world in which we live and equipping us to deal with the contingencies we will face going forward.

References

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