

A Philosophy of Magic

by

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout history magic has been an art that has instilled awe and wonder in its spectators. The magician used to be held in high esteem, as teacher, as scientist, as priest and even as philosopher. This being the case, throughout the history of philosophy, philosophers have deemed magic to be deception, to be a mode of misleading people into believing what is not true. Through the modern philosophical era, philosophers have been seeking a purely scientific method for questioning reality. It seems that, today, even the magician views his or her art as mere entertainment. The purpose of my thesis is to dispel the belief that magic is purely a hobby with no artistic value and that, like other artworks, magic too can cause one to question existence.

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The central question in the philosophy of art is, what is the value of art? Philosophical reflection on art would be idle unless art were valuable to us, and the significance of any question that arises in philosophical reflection on art derives directly or ultimately from the light that its answer throws upon the value of art.

- Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art*

Introduction

There has been much debate on the relation between philosophy and art. But no one has yet considered the art of magic. Although there has not been much philosophical discussion on the topic of magic, philosophers tend to view magic as something that never produces a desirable outcome. Magic is considered by many to be an art of deception and thus the practitioner as a purveyor of false beliefs. This may be one reason that magic has been ignored. I will take a Heideggerian approach to show that magic is not only an art, but that it is an art that can evoke emotion and elicit philosophical thinking.

Most people, whether laypersons or philosophers of art, view magic as lighthearted and thoughtless. I find this perplexing because of the significant role that magic has played in history, both aesthetically and philosophically. In the following sections, I will look at magic and its ability to stimulate philosophical thinking and to call to mind philosophical reflection as a true art form. Magic is not only a true art but like other art forms, magic, through wonder and awe, can engage one in philosophical thought.

Throughout this thesis it may seem as though that I am conflating two different meanings of the word ‘magic.’ I do it for a reason. In one sense of the word, ‘magic’ is an art form where the magician creates illusions in order to evoke emotions and bring about philosophical thought. In another sense of the word, ‘magic’ is considered to be a form of spirituality, i.e. the magician controls nature through spiritual or divine forces. When I use the word ‘magic’ I am referring to the first meaning of the word. Whether I am discussing magicians such as David Copperfield, or Dante, or magicians such as the Three *Magi*. I do this because many modern magicians believe that all magicians throughout history have used the secrets of illusions to prompt thought.

In my thesis, I will discuss the historical notions and uses of art in culture and religion to show that the symbolism of a work of art has always been of great importance. I will also discuss some of the common associations of magic with illusion that have led philosophers to disregard it. I will argue against this negative notion of magic and demonstrate, mainly through Heideggerian thought, that magic, like other artworks, can be awe inspiring and thought provoking.

On Art

People have always engaged in creating, appreciating, and finding pragmatic uses for art. As Paul Johnson states: “The number of art-works [sic] produced in world history is beyond computation, and sufficient numbers have been preserved, each of them unique . . .”¹ While each artwork is unique, many of the works have a common goal. That goal is to call to mind thought and evoke emotion. Most artworks handed down to us throughout history have attempted to evoke thought through symbolism that points to some form of higher idea, be it a divine idea or a human idea, such as the ancient statues of the Greek God’s or the Renaissance and Medieval Christian paintings and icons. This can also be seen in more modern works of art such as the Statue of Liberty. Although some artworks embody ideas that are inconsistent with the ideas that are embodied in other artworks, I am presupposing that a hermeneutic of any specific work is determinate. That is to say, that there is a limited set of interpretations for any given work. While I presuppose this, a defense of my assumption goes beyond the limits of this particular thesis.

Aesthetic formalism is “the view that in our interaction with works of art, form should be given primacy.”² The formal elements of a particular work of art, e.g. color,

¹ Paul Johnson, *Art, A New History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 1.

² *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2nd edition*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

compositional structure, etc, are themselves symbolic. While all aspects of a work of art are important for its aesthetic value, the symbolic aspect is of prime importance. Art, through its symbolism, points to something other than itself. This is where the strict aesthetic formalist is misguided. The form of a work of art hold symbolic qualities, e.g. a stone statue of the *Assumption of Mary*. The formal aspects of the statue hold many symbolic qualities, such as but not limited too, the colors and the compositional structure of the statue. This Even if a work is created purely for aesthetic value, that aesthetic value is still pointing to something beyond itself, even if it is only a deeper appreciation for aesthetic value.³

In Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he remarks on this.

The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuei*. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory.

In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together, in Greek, *syballein*. The work is a symbol.⁴

Religions have been known to use this mode of communication through art, be it through paintings, sculptures, literature, and works in other media. For example, most religions use art as a means of expression and as a way to bring their followers to an encounter with the divine through moral symbolism, followed by cognitive symbolism, in order to understand

³ I am addressing this issue taking a Platonic, Neo-Platonic or even a Thomistic approach. I am stating the possibility of a transcendental, a relation between the Form, or the Idea and what we see and know. Although the purpose of my thesis is not to show that there is a transcendental reality I do assume on occasions that there is one and that art can be a mode of understanding this transcendental reality.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 1993), 145-146.

moral relevance. The two forms of symbolism go hand in hand.

Artworks often point one beyond oneself and suggest many metaphysical qualities. From post-*doppelgänger* days through cave drawings and up to the present day, art has often been held in high esteem because of its metaphysical implication: “And it is precisely because of its non-material, its metaphysical qualities, art became the father of religion.”⁵ I might add that it is often precisely for these reasons that art has been of such lasting relevance. Many religions hold the metaphysical qualities of art in the highest esteem. They do so because of the metaphysical relation between, and the metaphysical study of, the human person, God, and the world.

It seems that the general populace, for the most part, no longer views art for its aesthetic value. It is often merely a form of escapism and pure entertainment. But art has the ability to be much more than merely a mode of entertainment and escapism. In the words of Heidegger,

(a)esthetics is of a different opinion; it is as old as logic. For aesthetics, art is the display of the beautiful in the sense of the pleasant, the agreeable. And yet art is the opening up of the Being of beings. We must provide a new content for the word “art” and for what it intends to name, on the basis of a fundamental orientation to Being that has been won back in an originary way.⁶

Art, for Heidegger, held extreme importance because of its *alētheic* qualities or its ability to clear an opening for truth to reveal itself. It is for this reason that many religions hold art to

⁵ Paul Johnson, *Art, A New History*, 13.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven & London: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 140.

be of high importance. Art may not be a mode of escapism, but a mode of realization and understanding of Being. Heidegger's main argument pertains to Greek art but his arguments are relevant for the art of magic as well. Magic, like other artworks, has aesthetic qualities that can clear an opening for truth to reveal itself.

Through the work of art, many religions put forth an effort to point one to the divine, which, according to the particular religions, enables the onlooker to see, and appreciate, true beauty. While certain religions utilize artworks to enhance religious experiences one does not have to be a religious person in order to appreciate art's aesthetic value. One can view art in such a way as to glimpse true beauty even if s/he is non-religious. A religious person, in the sense that I am using the term here, is a person who believes in a higher being or power and, therefore, practices certain rituals to communicate with that being or power. A non-religious person on the other hand, might hold certain beliefs such as, but not limited to, the existence of a divine being but would not participate in ritualistic practices.

The experience of a work of art stems back to cultures prior to the Greeks. For the Greeks, especially Plato, Pythagoras, and Parmenides, beauty was more than just something that occurred and stimulated emotions. Beauty was something that pointed beyond itself and helped in appreciating the importance of morality, and the nature of reality: "The Greek words for beautiful (*kalos*) and beauty (to *kalon*) have moral as well as aesthetic force."⁷ For the Greeks, beauty pointed to the good, which to them was the highest of all thought and being. The Beautiful and the Good held many similarities for the Greeks and can even be equated to each other. Like the Good, the Beautiful does not:

⁷ Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 88.

take form of a face, or of hands. Or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exist in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same invisible whole.⁸

Just as one who is good, for the Greeks, exhibits the qualities of unity, balance, coherence, and thematic development, so too does the Beautiful. It is this beauty, which exhibits the aforementioned qualities, to which the aesthetic property of an artwork points. In reference to the human person, it is often stated that, “beauty is on the inside.”⁹ Although this statement has been overused and clichéd this hackneyed phrase still holds true. Just as the good or moral person develops unity, balance, coherence, etc, so to does the beautiful person.

Art has the potential to allow one to see this beauty, and the play between the two, art and beauty, will continue in order to reveal the deeper meaning of existence. It is in this sense that some artworks are *alētheic*. Artworks often have the potential to display beauty. They often reveal deeper truths for those who follow specific religions and help in the formation and guiding of their lives, thoughts and actions in specific religious experiences. Crispin Sartwell states:

Now there are different moods and modes of religious experience, which

⁸ Plato's, *Symposium*, 211 a-b

⁹ I am not refuting or objecting to outer/physical beauty.

may be shattering, sudden, disruptive, or destructive of the personality. Religious experience can be volatile, and it can call out extreme desire. It can drive people to self-loathing, despair, self-immolation. But of course religious experience can also be peaceful, contemplative, edifying: it can bring you from perturbation and desire to stillness and peace.¹⁰

It is for this reason that religion uses art in a didactic mode. Although religious art can initiate thoughts of suffering and rouse up negative emotions it can also help religious people achieve stillness and peace in beauty and the divine. It is also for this reason that even the non-religious can experience beauty and morality in the cognitive aspects of a work of art, e.g. in a modern painting or sculpture of a globe, one could notice the beauty of the planet and be inspired to help in the effort of preserving it for future generations.

¹⁰ Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty*, 94.

On Magic

Magic is often defined as, “the art of deception,” and the magician is commonly known as, “the deceiver.” To the average person, the magician is one who tricks his or her audience into believing what is untrue and seeing what is not there. They do this through what is called illusion. When one thinks of a magician, s/he usually envisions a person wearing outlandish clothing and producing doves and fire from his or her fingertips. The magician is seen as one who walks out onto a stage that is filled with all sorts of paraphernalia, which are precisely set up to fool the spectator. The magician seems to be an all around “deceptdigitator,”¹¹ or one whose only goal is to hoodwink.

Many modern magicians also understand themselves as the “one who deceives.” Sadly, some magicians do not even consider their work to be an art; *de-facto*, most people do not consider magic to be an art. Maybe this is because many magicians do not recognize the deep-rooted meaning of their art, causing them to degrade their art with cheap humor and low comedy. Another possible reason is that anyone can go to their local bookstore and pick up a magic book under the section labeled *Games and Hobbies*. If magic is merely an entertainment or deception, replete with lame one-liners, then what significance is it to anyone, the magician or the spectator? Even philosophers have tended toward this negative view of magic and the magician.

¹¹ ‘Deceptdigitator’ is made up of two words, deception and prestidigitation.

Socrates, in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*, referring to an individual who believes that he knows all there is to know, says that:

we ought to retort to such a man that he must be a simple soul, and he seems to have met a Magician and an imitator who tricked him into believing he was all wise; when the fact is he is at fault, because he himself cannot tell the difference between knowledge and ignorance, or see what imitation is.¹²

Plato's Socrates equates magic with deception and trickery and, for him, sophistry which he loathed. According to Socrates, the role of the magician is to guide one into ignorance through deception. Other philosophers have taken similar positions on magic throughout the ages.

The existential phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger, speaks of magic and illusion as what is false, that which deceives one into misinterpreting the world. He says, in *Being and Time*, that, "*Da-sein* must explicitly and essentially appropriate what has also already been discovered, defending it against illusion and distortion and ensure itself of its discoveredness again and again."¹³ Heidegger is saying that the authentic person must protect him/herself against illusion because s/he can only be deceived by illusions and because of this, s/he is unable to discover his/her authenticity. In Heidegger's thought, illusion is a mode of deception that prevents one from realizing his/her authenticity, as opposed to clearing an opening for Being to become present it closes that opening.

But what if magic were something other than deception? What if magic, like other

¹² *The Great Dialogues of Plato*, Trans. W.H.D. Rouse. (New York: Signet Classic, 1956), 398.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. Joan Stambaugh. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 204.

forms of art, could cause us to think more deeply? What if magic could instigate moments of *alētheia*? Magic might, therefore, not be a tool of deception and concealment but a means of opening one up to wonder and truth. In other words, what if magic could actually help one in understanding oneself by seeing more clearly. For Heidegger '*alētheia*' is a mode of understanding truth when it first appears, when something is seen or revealed. '*Alētheia*' is truth uncovered or taken out of its hiddenness. I will argue in this thesis that magic is a discourse with metaphysical implications and, in a certain sense, the magician prods us to think more deeply by opening a clearing for the unveiling of Being. The art of magic can in fact help guide one's vision on his/her journey to self-actualization, self-understanding.

Take for instance the illusion of levitation. Magician Jeff McBride says that: "Levitation deals with the ancient desire of the human condition to transcend the material world."¹⁴ Through levitation, the magician transcends the boundaries of everydayness. Through this transcending, our thought is inspired to think beyond that which is right in front of us or purely empirical. Magicians such as Harry Keller, Alexander Herrmann, Howard Thurston, David Copperfield and many others have implicated the human condition in their acts in an attempt to better understand it and to transcend it. They implicate the human condition by utilizing our ordinary, everyday thoughts and ideas and using them in their art. They use these ideas to push beyond the limits that are contained within them. The magician, through the art of magic, transcends these limits, i.e. they challenge our concepts.

'Transcendence,' in the sense that I am using the word, does not necessarily mean

¹⁴ Carl Waldman and Joe Layden with Jamy Ian Swiss, *The Art of Magic* (Los Angeles: General Publishing Group, Inc. 1997), 102.

going beyond to an other world or plane of existence. Rather, it means to get a better, fuller understanding of the world in which we reside. Many existentialists believe that human beings create values. These existentialists reject a notion of transcendentalism that implies that there is something beyond this world. For these philosophers, there are no otherworldly values. There are only the values created by human beings. For them, existentialism means accepting that existence itself is transcendence. While this is a standard claim among existentialists, magic can still cause one to think about situations such as the afterlife, heaven, and hell. Whether the aforementioned exist is not what I am concerned with in this thesis.

Alexander Herrmann (1843-1896) had an illusion called *Cremation* in which he would burn his wife, Adelaide, alive. After the burning process, spirits would come and fly around the coffin which contained Herrmann's allegedly dead wife. It turns out that she was, in fact, alive and unharmed. This illusion instilled fear in the audience and made them contemplate death, the afterlife, and the insecurities of this life. This illusion is also an illustration of how one can easily be fooled into believing that others have the gift to communicate with the dead. Magicians have, for a long time now, dedicated some time to teaching people, through their art, that many so-called psychics are fraudulent and use simple magician's tricks to deceive people into believing what is not true. Herrmann's illusion, however, is an illusion that can cause one to wonder about deeper, more significant truths, or to question one's conceptual system. This illusion and those like it have always instilled wonder and awe in the audience watching.

As stated before, my attempt is to show that magic is truly an art, in that, like other art forms, it has the potential to point to something other than itself, but also that magic,

through wonder and awe, can and does engage with philosophical thinking by challenging one's conceptual system. As seen in the example above, the magician challenges our perceptions in order to question the human condition, to point beyond it toward mystery and to help in the understanding of mystery. Magic, like other forms of art, has the potential of engaging with philosophical thought and can help open one up to the awe of true Being and to the authentic self. The magician sparks questions in the minds of the audience. Aristotle, in the first book of his *Metaphysics*, states:

For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about grater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe.¹⁵

Aristotle is attributing philosophy to wonder. I would like to go one step further and attribute, but not limit, wonder to the work of magic. Although magic is not the only art form that evokes wonder, it is sufficient to do so. Through magic, the magician can cause one to wonder about reality and all that is contained within it.

When speaking of the role of magic and its potential to evoke philosophical thought, it cannot be ignored that there is a documented tradition that tells us that one of the most well known and studied philosophers of all time lived among magicians. Plato "lived for thirteen years among the *Magi* of Memphis and in the City of the Sun."¹⁶ This is ironic because Plato, after all, is the one who wrote the *Republic* and attributed those

¹⁵ Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1941), 692.

¹⁶ Paul Christian, *The History and Practice of Magic* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 122.

aforementioned condemning words to Socrates, which claimed that the magician is one who fools people into believing they are all wise when they are not. Also, if it were not for the Oracle at Delphi, Socrates would not have gone on his quest for knowledge. In fact, most magicians today believe that the Oracle at Delphi was a performer of illusions, one who used the art of magic to help others to question the world.

The practice of magic is a thought form and an art that most likely predates recorded history: “The word magic is derived from the name of a priestly caste in ancient Persia, the *magi*.”¹⁷ The art of magic, like other forms of art, is an art that is experienced by both the magician and the spectator. John Dewey points out at the beginning of *Art as Experience* that, “In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience.”¹⁸ Although art is that which comes out of experience, it too may be experienced. The magician, through the art of magic, attempts to bring experience together in a form of unification and wholeness, so that one can make sense of these experiences. The magician, like other artists:

cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, (s)he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. (S)He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total.¹⁹

¹⁷ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 14.

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 1.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 14.

The magician through his or her art attempts to tie all aspect of experience together. S/he may attempt to bring the past into the present as well as anticipate the future. Magic, like other forms of art, often “celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past [reinforces] the present and in which the future is a quickening of what is now.”²⁰ Magic is an art that is experienced, and the magician is the artist who produces it. Both the magician and the onlooker are constantly experiencing the art of magic. Magic, like other forms of art, is symbolic. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Martin Heidegger states in *The Origin of the Work of Art* that:

The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuei*. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together, in Greek, *symbollein*. The work is a symbol.²¹

Magic is an art that symbolizes, that combines experiences and creates new insights. This can be seen in the aforementioned examples of the various magicians who implement worldly conditions in their acts. This will be further discussed later in the thesis.

When one hears the word ‘magic’, many images may come to mind, from the ancient shamans to the present day magician. Although all of these images may come to mind when one thinks about the word ‘magic’ not many people actually know what the word means. The word ‘*magi*’²² comes from:

²⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 17.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 1993), 145-146.

²² The word ‘*Magi*’ is the word that ‘magic’ was derived from, refer back to page 15.

the Chaldaean word *Maghdim* which means wisdom with the addition of the general sense that we give to the term philosophy. The magi, or the adepts of magic—we may even call them priests of the wisdom of antiquity—where philosophers dedicated to the study of the universe, that sphere whose center, they said, is everywhere, whose circumference has no bounds, and at the heart of which are united without being confounded—or are separated, without being lost from sight—the *physical*, the *intellectual* and the *divine* worlds: the triple face of all knowledge, the triple base of all analysis, the triple stem of all synthesis.²³

One could say that like the philosopher, the magician inspires metaphysical thinking. Magic is ultimately not about stage illusions, card and coin tricks, the parlor or street magicians. The magician Jeff McBride says: “The Enchantments of Magic point beyond illusion to the great mystery: the eternal transformation of life and death and rebirth.”²⁴ The magician through the art of magic, like the philosopher, contemplates many different subjects such as, life itself, death, love, God, the human person and the world. The difference between the philosopher and the magician is that they approach these ultimate mysteries through different means, played by their own rules and unique games.

²³ Christian, *The History and Practice of Magic*, 18-19.

²⁴ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 25.

On The Uncovering of Truth in Magic and Philosophy

Both magic and philosophy deal with the understanding of truth. Magic that deals with meaning and truth, as magician Eugene Burger calls it, is ‘symbolic magic.’ Eugene says of himself “I need to take my performances beyond the props and move them into the realm of *meanings*.”²⁵ When the magician utilizes symbolic magic, s/he incorporates life and all of its experiences. The magician uses magic as a means to explore our concepts and perceptions of life and thus raise the question:

At its heart, conjuring is not commonplace or trivial or silly or ‘cute.’ The moment in which a magical effect occurs can be a moment of compelling uniqueness in which our eyes and minds are teased into a realm of enchantment wherein we contact something very special: the *world-as-magical*.²⁶

The magician can take a “cutting to the ace” routine, where the magician cuts the deck to all four aces and adds meaning to it by illustrating how card sharks cheat and swindle. The magician could also do an effect with money that disappears and reappears and add meaning to it by explaining that, if truly needed, the money will somehow be there or that money is not of primordial importance. Something else is needed for the support of life,

²⁵ Eugene Burger and Robert E. Neale, *Magic and Meaning* (Washington: Hermetic Press, 1995), 140.

²⁶ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 142.

such as love. The magician, through his/her magic, can always reveal meaning and truth. Many magicians fail in communicating these and other ideas when performing card magic, as well as in other forms of magic. They fail to because they do not understand the deep-rooted history of their art, or they just do not care anymore. In fact, the deck of cards, a tool utilized by the magician that was derived from the Minor Arcana of the Tarot deck²⁷, reveals many truths that the magician can bring forth through his/her art.

The deck of cards feels magical in the hands of the magician. Today's deck of cards contains fifty-two cards. In a complete year, there are fifty-two weeks. The cards are divided evenly into red and black. This is a representation of night and day. A deck of cards has four suits. There are four seasons. Each suit contains thirteen cards. There are thirteen lunar cycles each year. If you add all of the cards together (Joker = 1, Jack = 11, Queen = 12, King = 13) you get the total of 365. There are 365 days per year. Many magicians have written extensively on this subject, but for a clear understanding I suggest reading *David Blaine Mysterious Stranger*.²⁸

There are four suits: Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds and Spades. The heart is vital to life. It keeps the blood circulating through the body. The heart also symbolizes the deepest mystery, the mystery of love. A club is an organization of people who unite. In fact, the word 'club' means, "to unite." Unity and community are considered by many to be essential to the life of the human person. It is through community that one can come to a

²⁷ The four suits of the Tarot deck are: Swords, Wands, Cups and Coins (also called Disk or Pentacles, etc depending on the particular deck). When describing the deck of cards for magical interpretations I will refer to the modern deck of playing cards as opposed to the Tarot deck. I mention the Tarot deck for the reason of informing the reader that the modern deck of cards has a deep-rooted history.

²⁸ David Blaine, *Mysterious Stranger* (New York: Random House, Inc. 2002.) 44.

better, more complete understanding of oneself, personal identity, e.g. When one is called to the priesthood in the Catholic faith, he is called forth by the community of the faithful and discerns that calling within the community. The diamond is an extremely hard and precious stone. It could very well symbolize the difficulty of existence and the endurance of the human person. The spade is a digging tool. This could exemplify that no matter what the struggle is that one faces in life, s/he has the means or the tools to get out of it, or overcome the struggle. Although these ideas are my interpretations of the four suits, but many other concepts could very easily be introduced. Other magicians may have different interpretations in order to better fit their routines and the meanings they are trying to convey. No wonder the deck of cards feels so significant in the hands of the magician. The significations are almost endless.

The question now becomes “what is truth?” The question concerning truth here is not about any particular truth but, rather, it is about the very essence of truth. In Heidegger’s *On the Essence of Truth*, he starts out by saying:

Our Topic is the *essence* of truth. The question regarding the essence of truth is not concerned with whether truth is a truth of practical experience or of economic calculation, the truth of a technical consideration or of political sagacity, or, in particular, a truth of scientific research or of artistic composition, or even the truth of thoughtful reflection or of cultic belief.

The question of essences disregards all this and attends to the one thing that in general distinguishes every ‘truth’ as truth.²⁹

We are not looking for any particular truth or a magical truth, as opposed to a philosophical

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 115.

truth, but rather what it is that constitutes truth as such.

Truth is traditionally defined as:

veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectūs. This can be taken to mean: truth is the correspondence [*Angleichung*] of the matter to knowledge. But it can also be taken as saying: truth is the correspondence of knowledge to the matter.³⁰

Traditionally, truth is the correspondence of a proposition to a state of affairs. Traditional correspondence theory claims that a proposition is true if it corresponds to what is known. Imagine for a moment that you are standing in a room with no windows and all of the walls are painted black. On the wall behind you there is a red clock with gold numbers on it and two silver hands. Turn around now and point to the clock. You know that what is hanging on the wall is a clock because it corresponds to your idea of it.

That which is true is actually true: “The true is actual ... The true, whether it be a matter or proposition, is what accords, the accordant [*das Stimmende*].”³¹ That which is known agrees with what is the case, or more importantly, for Heidegger, truth is *alētheic*, a revealing or a dis-covering. Heidegger favors the theory of truth as a mode of uncovering over the propositional theory of truth. By uncovering, Heidegger means that we need to allow Being to reveal itself in beings. We need to highlight all of what is so that a clearing for truth can open. For Heidegger, truth as *alētheic*, is distinct from the notion of truth as propositional or truth as correspondence. For Heidegger truth is a disclosure of Being and

³⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 118. ‘*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectūs*’ is a theory of truth that Heidegger rejects. He describes this theory in order to introduce his readers to the *alētheic* theory of truth.

³¹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 117.

for the magician, the art of magic clears an opening for Being to present itself.

If we allow ourselves to think of truth as being only propositional, then we remain in one of the oldest traditions of thinking about what truth means. This tradition of thinking states that “truth is the accordance (*homoiōsis*) of a statement (*logos*) with a matter (*pragma*).”³² If the philosopher or the magician holds to this notion of truth alone, than neither philosophers nor magicians will be able to point beyond to greater truth. *De facto*, the magician, “[seemingly] strips away all logic.”³³ The magician, through the art of magic, does this by twisting the logical to present the seemingly impossible. Both thinking and truth have to be so much more.

Truth goes beyond the theory of correspondence. “The essence of correspondence is determined ... by the kind of relation that obtains between the statement and the thing.”³⁴ Truth is something much more meaningful. Truth is constantly surrounding us as human beings; truth is incessantly being made present. It appears to us sometimes rather quickly and sometimes not so quickly. The point is that in order to recognize correspondence, one must have discovered the nature of relation. Correspondence is contingent upon a more primordial dis-discovery. Magic, by allowing us to question our preconceptions and presuppositions, dispels those that cover up and encourages those that enlighten or discover.

Truth is always presenting itself to us and is even present in untruth, “to present

³² Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 120.

³³ David Blaine, *Mysterious Stranger* (New York: Random House, Inc. 2002), 7. I added the word seemingly to the quote because logic is something that cannot be stripped away.

³⁴ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 121.

here means to let the thing stand opposed as object.”³⁵ Truth is that which comes to presence when we produce an opening for it. It crosses along the field of openness: “What is thus opened up, solely in this strict sense, was experienced early in Western thinking as ‘what is present’ and for a long time has been named ‘being.’”³⁶ Truth is Being coming to presence. When we view truth as Being coming to presence, and not only as propositional, “the traditional assignment of truth exclusively to statements as the sole essential locus of truth falls away.”³⁷ Truth, or Being coming to presence, takes place in that openness. Not all truths are propositional; some truths elude linguistic expression. Magic calls into question one’s preconceptions and thus challenges one to employ appropriate ones that reveal or bring to presence Being rather than cover it over or hide it. Like the metaphysician, the magician is concerned with Being rather than truth.

Heidegger’s most important word for the meaning of truth is the Greek word *alētheia*, which originally meant “that which is not hidden or that which is unconcealed [revealed].” Truth is a revealing of Being. Heidegger expands on this and says:

If we translate *alētheia* as ‘unconcealment’ rather than ‘truth,’ this translation is not merely more literal; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings.³⁸

³⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 121.

³⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 122.

³⁷ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 122.

³⁸ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 125.

In order to understand the truth of Being, one must first let beings be. One should not attempt to change or alter beings. One must let that which is (Being) present itself as it is to oneself, free of presuppositions. When one lets Being be, then Being discloses itself in truth. Truth as *alētheia* is not a mode of truth that is connected with that which appears. The allowing of something to appear, in Heidegger, is considered to be the first notion of truth. One must first turn his/her attention towards something in order for any further understanding of that something to take place, rendering untruth as that which remains concealed.

The human person is free, and it is through this freedom that the person is able to let beings be: “Freedom, understood as letting beings be, is the fulfillment and consummation of the essence of truth in the sense of the disclosure of beings.”³⁹ The philosopher seeks to understand what a thing is and its truth. The magician points one’s awareness to what a thing is and, therefore, to its truth. The magician does this through wonder. The magician does this by causing one to wonder about or question his/her preconceptions, presuppositions or mode of conceptualizing in order to clear an opening for the self-presentation of Being. When done properly, both the philosopher and the magician are letting the thing be. When the magician points to a particular being, s/he is pointing directly at what that particular being is. The magician is pointing at the essence of that being or the is-ness of that being. The magician points to beings, and through illusion, breaks down our presuppositions and says: “Look closely, there is so much more.” The magician does this by demonstrating through illusion that sense perceptions are not what one thinks they are. In fact, our senses are often deceived and, because of these deceptions

³⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 127.

one may misinterpret his/her surroundings. The magician uses his/her knowledge of sense deception in order to show that one can think beyond the appearances to come to a realization that one's preconceptions are possibly mistaken.

Another key Heideggerian term is the German word '*Da-sein*.' '*Da-sein*' literally means "there being," but when translated in the sense in which Heidegger uses it, it means "being there." '*Da-sein*' is the presentation of being-in-the-world, the authentic human person: "In *Da-sein* the essential ground, long ungrounded, on the basis of which man is able to *ek-sist*, is preserved for him."⁴⁰ To exist here means to be open to the unveiling of Being or to Being presenting itself as something that can be understood through the intellect in a mode of exactness.

For Heidegger, only the human person is open to the self-presentation of Being. *Da-sein* is the one being who can look at Being and see Being itself. Being, for Heidegger, is that through which all other beings are understood. *Da-sein*, as the authentic human being, is the only one who can come to an understanding of the fullness of Being. For *Da-sein* is the only being that asks the question, "What does it mean to be?" The magician helps one to open his/her eyes to the truth that surrounds him/her, and therefore is not transcendental in the sense of otherworldly. The magician, through the art of magic, does this by clearing an opening for Being to disclose itself.

The magician takes the world and attempts to explicate it through illusion, the art of magic. For example, many times in one's life one can feel as though s/he is lost and has no hope of returning home. The magician Dante (1882-1955) had an illusion in which three people would get into a basket, which would then be suspended by a balloon. The three

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 126.

people would mysteriously vanish and reappear behind the audience. They always found their way back to the stage. The name of this illusion is *Mystery of the Stratosphere*. David Copperfield has an illusion that he calls *Thirteen*. In this illusion thirteen people are selected at random from the audience and brought up on stage. David Copperfield causes them all to vanish from the stage and reappear behind the audience or on a balcony. They too always find their way back home. Both Dante and David Copperfield utilize life experiences in their act as magicians. The aforementioned examples are illustrations of how the magician points one to mystery forgotten, that everydayness of *Da-sein*. Both of these illusions cause the audience to think deeper into the ordinary everyday modes of life and allows for a clearing, an opening for Being to present itself.

Da-sein, in its mode of concealment, is mystery: “But the forgotten mystery of *Dasein* is not eliminated by the forgottenness; rather, the forgottenness bestows on the apparent disappearance of what is forgotten a particular presence [*Gegenwart*].”⁴¹ The human person fails to see mystery because of what is already there in front of him/her. The human being is concerned with many different particular beings and, because of this, s/he is no longer concerned with Being as a whole. By doing this, s/he becomes what Heidegger call *Das-man* or inauthenticity. *Das-man* concerns him/herself with particular beings, or truths, and gets wrapped up in individual meanings causing him/her to forget the whole.

The sole concern with particular beings and particular truths is “Man’s flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next,

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 132.

passing the mystery by—this is *erring*.⁴² While the human person mistakenly passes by mystery, the magician redirects him/her back to mystery. The magician can use particulars to point him/her back to Being and truth. The role of the magician is to help in the clarification and unification of the vast range of particular experiences. When this redirecting occurs, both the magician and the spectator may once again be able to glimpse mystery:

The glimpse into the mystery out of errancy is a question—in the sense of that unique question of what being as such is as a whole. This questioning thinks the question of the *Being* of beings, a question that is essentially misleading and thus in its manifold is still not mastered⁴³

This question concerning the meaning of what it means to be has traditionally been a philosophical concern, a metaphysical question. In this sense, the magician, by questioning and pointing to being as a whole through the art of magic, is engaging in a philosophical dialogue.

The essence of truth is the unveiling of Being. This is what makes all truths be true “Being appears primordially in the light of concealing withdrawal. The name of this clearing [*Lichtung*] is *alētheia*.⁴⁴ Truth as *alētheia* is what the magician aims to reveal. It is the role of the magician to open one up to mystery, wonder, and truth, and s/he does so by reconsidering our presuppositions and preconceptions. By doing this, the magician has the potential to cause one to question Being and, thus, to come to a better understanding of

⁴² Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 133.

⁴³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 135.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 137 – 138.

the essence of truth through the art of magic.

The Magician, Magic and Philosophy

The main task of the magician is to prompt philosophical/metaphysical thinking. The magician raises questions, and the audience brings with them many questions, about life, death, etc. Metaphysical questions are raised by the actions of the magician. What distinguishes the metaphysical question from all other questions? The answer is twofold. “First, every metaphysical question always encompasses the whole range of metaphysical problems. Each question itself is always the whole.”⁴⁵ Secondly, “every metaphysical question can be asked only in such a way that the questioner as such is present together with the question, that is, is placed in question.”⁴⁶ All metaphysical questions are one in the sense that they all contain the entire range of all metaphysical issues and must also include the entire questioner, and “magic is an incredible art that in one mysterious moment can make you question everything.”⁴⁷

The magician views the world and questions it in such a way that all aspects [of the world] are integrated into his/her worldview. The magician through magical thinking attempts to better understand reality: “Magical thinking is the drawing of connections

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 93.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 93.

⁴⁷ Blaine, *Mysterious Stranger*, 7.

between elements of the world that may in fact not have any connection.”⁴⁸ When the magician performs, s/he invites the audience into this questioning process. Both the magician, and the audience, question together. The art of magic involves both the question and the questioner. “Metaphysical inquiry must be posed as a whole and from the essential position of the existence [*Dasein*] that questions.”⁴⁹ Magic evokes a process of metaphysical questioning and the magician invites his/her audience to participate in that questioning.

For example, I perform an effect called *Sponge Balls*. In this effect, the sponge balls appear and disappear in the hands of the spectator. It is a beautiful piece of magic, in which the magic occurs in the spectator’s own hands as opposed to the hands of the magician. It is an intimate illusion, in which the magician and the spectator question the phenomenon of transportation together. This effect helps bring one into the world of wonder and openness. It is an illusion in which the magician, in a special way, invites the spectator to participate in the magic and, through the magic, also invites the spectator into the questioning process. The magician does this by inviting the spectators to engage in the magic on a more intimate level. On this level of magic, the spectator seemingly performs the magic alongside the magician. While the spectator may not be actually performing the magic, s/he is in fact involved in the questioning process with the magician.

Metaphysical questioning is not the same as scientific questioning. Scientific questioning is an empirical form of questioning, whereas metaphysical questioning goes beyond the scope of the physical world. Scientific questioning concerns particular beings

⁴⁸ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 54.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 94.

whereas metaphysical questioning concerns Being itself, rather than particular beings. Neither the metaphysician nor the magician questions or answers scientifically:

what is remarkable is that, precisely in the way scientific man secures to himself what is most properly his, he speaks of something different. What should be examined are beings only, and besides that—nothing; beings alone, and further—nothing; solely beings, and beyond that—nothing.⁵⁰

The two key words in this quote by Heidegger are “beings” and “nothing.” The magician examines beings and nothingness. The magician, along with the metaphysician, questions the essence of what is, or Being, through that which is not, or nothingness. The magician purposely seems to think in contradictions: “For thinking, which is always essentially thinking about something, must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing.”⁵¹ The magician does this everyday. S/he acts in a way that is seemingly contrary to his/her essence in order to produce a work of art that is truly thought provoking. It is not in the essence of the human being to be able to walk through solid objects or to fly, etc. But acting as though one can seemingly do such things causes truly thought provoking ideas.

The reason why the magician is able to create and perform such magical examples of reality is because s/he first thinks in terms of contradiction. For example, at one point or another most people have a dream in which they can fly. This dream of flight can be traced throughout recorded history and probably dates back to the beginning of human existence. The magician takes this dream and makes it into a seeming reality. One of the most well

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 95.

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 97.

known illusions of flight is preformed by David Copperfield, which I will discuss in more detail later. In order for the magician to think of such illusions s/he must first think of what contradicts physics. Although the illusion itself does not contradict physics, the concept of human flight does.

Throughout history, magicians have been creating the illusion of passing solid object through other solid objects. In fact, many magicians themselves have seemingly passed through solid objects such as walls, mirrors and sheets of metal. In order to accomplish this seemingly impossible piece of magic, the magician must first think of that which contradicts physics. This is just a miniscule part of the thought of the magician in his/her worldview.

The magician first thinks of that which negates the laws of nature. It is this mode of thought that leads the magician on his/her journey in the world of magic. It is also this mode of thought that enables the magician to invite the spectator along with him/her on this journey. Instead of thinking of a specific thing or event, s/he thinks of the nothing and of lack of events. The magician thinks of the nothing precisely because it is the nothing that seems to be the restriction of the human being:

One of the realities of human nature is that we define our lives by restrictions. We define ourselves by what we can't do. One of the functions of the magician is to say, 'Well, maybe we can,' or at least, 'Maybe we're not as restricted as we thought we were.' By transcending the restrictions of nature in this metaphorical way, the magician is saying, 'Wait a minute. Maybe you stopped thinking too soon; maybe your

expectations were set too low.⁵²

The magician has to go beyond such restriction at all times in order to point to mystery.

Thinking of the nothing is essential because, in order to think of that which is, one must think of that which is not. As illogical as this may sound, this is what the magician does on a regular basis, through magic. Magic gives rise to thinking and it, “[seemingly] strips away all logic, it confronts fears, and brings us to a place of constant wonder and enchantment.”⁵³ The magician can only do this through questioning life and thinking about Being and the notion of nothing. To think of the nothing seems impossible but, in fact, it is not and we think the nothing all the time: “Whatever we may make of it, we do know the nothing, if only as a word we rattle off everyday.”⁵⁴ The nothing is not merely a word we use everyday but it is “the complete negation of the totality of beings.”⁵⁵ The nothing is that which negates all that is. The nothing as that which is the total opposite of Being is also that which brings us closest to Being. This is similar to the way in which a notion of negative space helps us in understanding visual form.

Although we may never be able to fully comprehend Being, we can glimpse Being and come to a better understanding of it. The magician Peter Samelson states: “I can’t really do magic. I can only help you see it.”⁵⁶ This is true for all magicians. A magician helps direct one to Being by directing one toward that which is wondrous. Peter Samelson, as well as all other magicians, also state: “I can’t really show you Being. I can only help

⁵² Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 178.

⁵³ Blaine, *Mysterious Stranger*, 7. Read footnote number 44 on page 29.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 98.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 98.

⁵⁶ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 13.

you to see Being.”

The first magical performance recorded in written history took place around 2700 B.C., by the magician Dedi. Dedi was known for performing magic and holding his audience’s interest.

As the story goes, Dedi came to the royal court and apparently, in the name of entertainment and not religion, performed a number of conjuring tricks, such as decapitating and replacing the heads of a goose, a pelican, and an ox.⁵⁷

The description of this was recorded in 1700 B.C., about a thousand years after the performance. It was by his ability to hold the audience’s interest that Dedi was able to open them up to the disclosure of Being. Not only was it his name that was well known but also his magic and, more importantly, the way in which he presented his magic.

The word ‘interest’ is a key word for the magician and for the discussion of the magician as one who engages in philosophical/metaphysical inquiry. The word ‘interest’ comes from two Latin words—*inter* and *esse*. The word ‘*inter*’ means “to be in the midst of” and the word ‘*esse*’ means “that which is,” or “Being.” The magician holds one’s interest by being fascinating. S/he attracts the audience: “The magician delights you because he or she slaps logic in the face, then makes a fool out of reason, and finally converts impossibility into absolute certainty.”⁵⁸ The magician, by holding one’s interest, helps one to be open to the unveiling of Being. The magician helps one to adjust one’s mode of being.

⁵⁷ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 36.

⁵⁸ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, Foreword.

The founding mode of attunement [*die Befindlichkeit der Stimmung*] not only reveals beings as a whole in various ways, but this revealing—far from being merely incidental—is also the basic occurrence of our *Da-sein*.⁵⁹

The art of magic can help one come to a fuller self-awareness through wonder by pointing beyond toward mystery. As the magician Eugene Burger says:

Magic is about life. For magic to be born in an audience's mind, I must envelop them in a sense of mystery. I may do this verbally or I may do it visually. In a magical experience the props, as symbols, point beyond themselves to the larger mystery.⁶⁰

Magic is always that which points beyond and the magician is always the one who points and says: "Look there is something bigger than us, it is mystery." For example, look at the magician Harry Houdini. He was only five feet, two inches in height:

So here is this very small man, in chains. But the chains cannot hold him. Now think about the period in which Houdini lived. It was a period in which immigrants from Europe were flooding into America. It was a time of many little people. Many of who felt powerless. It was an extraordinarily powerful metaphor.⁶¹

Here is this small man getting out of extremely large restraints. This signified the time in which he lived and the difficulties of the immigrants. One most likely felt that, if Houdini could accomplish such big feats, so could everyone else. He helped, through his

⁵⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 100.

⁶⁰ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 6.

⁶¹ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 163.

escapology, to instill faith and hope in members of the audience of escaping the conditions that bound them.

The magician is a communicator of wonder. The role of the magician should be a serious one and not one of cheap comedy. Through the act of the magician, the spectator and the magician, are introduced to wonder, awe, and astonishment. The magician is a mythmaker and a wonder communicator. Through this mythmaking, the magician attempts to open one up to self-discovery through an encounter:

Magicians are ambiguous figures dealing with life and death. And yet in doing it, I think they take us in a theater, a kind of sacred theater, if you will, of experiencing life and death and coming out a little bit more confident that we can master ourselves, and be masters of our own bodies.⁶²

It is in the encounter that the art of magic is set to work and that truth about Being is unveiled. In the play of the magician, both magic and the other are being encountered. Both the magician and the spectator encounter each other and the magic. Magic is an art and, in the art of magic, beauty shines. The magician through his/her art helps him/herself, along with the other, to glimpse beauty. On the magicians journey of self-discovery and self-mastery, s/he also helps the other in answering the self same question, “Who am I?”

Through the history of magic, the magician has always related his/her work to issues of life: “Any good trick is accomplished by our own imagination. Any great trick involves our own beliefs about the meaning of life.”⁶³ The magician confronts cultural norms and taboos to guide him/herself, as well as the audience, into a deeper understanding

⁶² Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 60.

⁶³ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 97.

of the self and of life, breaking through social constructs, if you will. The magician not only exposes social constructions, but s/he also challenges them by questioning them. In the history of magic, one will see illusions of restoration after one has been cut in half or burned alive. This form of magic was even prevalent before our modern notion of the magician: “When we look back, before the magic of classical societies to the earlier traditions of the shamans, and even across quite different cultures, we discover dismemberment and restoration to be fundamental.”⁶⁴ We see this in many works of art including, but not limited to, paintings and mythological stories. This is because the human person, from the beginning of recorded history, has been questioning life, death, and that which happens after death. Through the development of different thoughts and the creation of illusions based on these ideas the magician is constantly questioning these and other issues.

In pre-modern times, the magician was a teacher. S/he was the one who taught, healed, and instilled hope and faith in the people/audience. The role of the magician was never solely to hoodwink the spectator but to help guide him/her along the journey of life. As mentalist Max Maven puts it:

The classic role of the shaman is to be the delegate from the community whose commission is to obtain hidden information about secret connections and patterns that may exist in the world to bring those back to the community and therefore make the community work better, to make life easier.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 96-97.

⁶⁵ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 26.

The shaman, medicine man, medicine woman, the three *Magi*, and others are examples of the magician as teacher/philosopher. The magician, in time past, has always been the one who pointed beyond to mystery, through awe. The magician has always been one who engaged in metaphysical discourse: “Metaphysics is inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as whole for our grasp.”⁶⁶ Magic, when properly constructed, has the capability to help open one up to understanding mystery. This is achieved through awe and wonderment.

The magician points to and attempts to reveal for us the strange. This brings us to another term of importance in Heidegger’s philosophy—*unheimlich*.⁶⁷ This uncanniness or strangeness arises out of the angst of *Da-sein*. When *Da-sein* is unworried, s/he is flowing through the everydayness of existence. *Da-sein*, when, troubled is pulled out of the everydayness of his/her existence.

Angst, on the other hand, fetches *Da-sein* back out of its entangled absorption in the ‘world.’ Everyday familiarity collapses. *Da-sein* is individuated, but *as* being-in-the-world. Being-in enters the existential ‘mode’ of *not-being-at-home*. The talk about ‘uncanniness’ means nothing other than this.⁶⁸

It is through myth and illusion that the magician attempts to reveal this mysteriousness by the eerie questioning of the unknown and the conversion of the impossible to the possible. The role of the magician is to take what is unknown and attempt to understand it.

⁶⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 106.

⁶⁷ *Unheimlich* is the German word of uncanniness of strangeness.

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176.

The strange is that which is all around us and “[o]nly when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder.”⁶⁹ Through this pointing at wonder, the audience and the magician are able to question more fully and metaphysically. Through wonder comes the possibility of questioning. For it is

[o]nly on the ground of wonder—the revelation of the nothing—does the ‘why?’ loom before us. Only because the ‘why’ is possible as such can we in a definite way inquire into grounds, and ground them. Only because we can inquire and ground is the destiny of our existence placed in the hands of the researcher⁷⁰

It is this “why” that the magician tries to invoke and help answer. It is in this “why” that the magician researches. The modern magician has to pull away from the notion of magic as pure deception because neither magic nor “[p]hilosophy can ... be measured by the standard of the idea of science.”⁷¹ The modern magician has to go back to the mysterious and attempt to understand.

How can we distinguish “magic as a problem” from “magic as mystery?” I will first give two example of magic as problem, and then I will give two examples of magic as mystery and discuss each one. There are two basic examples of magic as pure trickery. The first is the game known as *Three Card Monte* and the second is the *Pea and Shell Game*. In *Three Card Monte* the magician has two black cards and a red card. S/he tells the spectator to follow the red card and point to it. The spectator is always wrong because the magician is using slight of hand to deceive the spectator’s perception of what is actual

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 109.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 109.

⁷¹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 110

happening. The *Pea and Shell Game* is similar but, rather than cards, the magician uses three shells and a pea. Again the spectator is unable to find the pea. This form of trickery is meant exclusively to deceive the spectator into seeing what is not real, and believing what is not true. In this form of deception there is no clearing for Being to present itself.

These two games are usually seen preformed on the streets. The magician or hustler is playing an impossible game for the entertainment of the spectator and, more importantly, for his/her benefit. In these two scenarios the magician attempts to swindle him/her. For the first example of magic as mystery, I will discuss the *Indian Rope trick*. The reason for discussing this example first is because, although it is a familiar story and a well-known effect, it has never been seen. In fact no one knows whether this effect has ever been presented. “The Indian Rope Trick is, as Will Dexter wrote, ‘the trick that never was.’”⁷² This is possibly what makes it such a great and mysterious effect.

The story is about an Indian *fakir*⁷³ who causes a piece of rope to begin to rise up into the air. It rises above the clouds so that no one is able to see the top of it. The *fakir* then has a boy climb to the top of the rope and vanish with it, above the clouds. After the boy is out of sight, the *fakir* throws his knife up into the air and the boy comes falling down – his body in several pieces. The *fakir* collects the boy’s severed body and places it into a basket. The boy rises out of the basket intact and alive. “Hindu philosophers, over a thousand years ago, described the trick to facilitate their explanation of human captivity to illusion, and of the existence of deeper levels of reality.”⁷⁴ The *Indian Rope Trick* was

⁷² Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 53.

⁷³ *Fakir*: an Indian street Magician.

⁷⁴ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 55.

performed, either physically or verbally, to illuminate life's mysteries.

The Indian Rope Trick is a story about the fundamental organization of existence, and about how to live in it. It is the trick that never was. It is also the trick that always will be. We did not find the rope trick because we did not look for that fundamental magic of imagination that provides the miracle of meaning. Perhaps the message of the magic is that everyone tells such a story, however differently. Maybe we all perform the trick that never was and always will be.⁷⁵

The *Indian Rope Trick* produces a deeply philosophical effect that points one to a deeper meaning, a deeper understanding of mystery.

The second example of magic as mystery that I will discuss is an effect performed by one of today's most well known magician, David Copperfield. The title of this particular illusion is *Flying*. David Copperfield himself is well known throughout the world because he points his audiences to the mysterious. Before he performs his flying illusion, he first tells the audience of his childhood dream of always wanting to fly. By relaying this story, he is encouraging the audience to recollect their childhood dreams of wanting to fly. Toward the end of the illusion, he pulls a lady out of the audience and holds her in his arms as he begins to fly around the stage with her. He is invoking a sense of wonder and awe in his audience that they all had when they were younger. That is the human dream of flight. Magic is not merely about the props at hand, nor is it purely about mere entertainment in the sense of applause and laughter. Magic is an art that is about taking the audience to a different world, as well as raising questions about our assumptions

⁷⁵ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 55-56.

regarding our existence in this world.

One performance may move us to tears or to deep sadness. Another performance may frighten us so thoroughly that we are literally grasping or screaming in fear ... yet other performances may give us a sense of our place in the cosmos—and this, of course, is what the earliest conjuring performances seemed designed to do.⁷⁶

This is also what some of the most famous performers of our time seem to do. David Copperfield's flying illusion, along with his story behind it, tells the audience that dreams can come true if they are not abandoned. While it is true that the magician attempts to pull one into an encounter, it is also true that the spectator has to be open to the encounter as well. If the spectator is closed off, then the encounter cannot take place and there will be no clearing for Being to disclose itself.

The magician, no matter how good s/he may be, is dependent on the audience. Without the audience, the magic is impossible. There are even some things that are impossible for the magician. If the audience is open to the magic then the possibilities are endless. With this openness, the magician is able to enter full force into a metaphysical excursion, clearing an opening for Being to present itself.

When 'magic' is performed in light of the mysterious it truly causes metaphysical thought. It is moving one into the unknown and shedding some light on it to reveal it as truth. Magic, like metaphysics, "moves everywhere in the realm of the truth of Being, which truth remains the unknown and the unfathomable ground."⁷⁷ The magician, like the

⁷⁶ Burger and Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, 5.

⁷⁷ Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Penguin Group, 1975), 258.

metaphysician, points one to this unfathomable ground in such a way that s/he is able to glimpse it. As Lee Siegel points out:

While the magician priest was reputed to effect changes in the world, to modulate reality, the magician/entertainer aspires to amaze and delight with that amazement, to modify not the world but our perception of it, to create illusions and a sense of wonderful wonderment.⁷⁸

It is through wonder that the magician points his/her audience to the mysteries of Being and truth.

The magician truly is a communicator of wonder his/her work is the art of magic, rendering magic as the wondrous. It is the role of the magician to ignite a sense of awe and wonder in the lives of all people so that they might be able to see Being and take in its truth. The magician through the art of magic is able to help one answer the question, “Who am I?”

⁷⁸ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 76.

Conclusion

The magician takes advantage of the philosophical dichotomy between appearance and reality and, by doing so, manipulates the senses in order to expose the audience to a deeper sense of reality. The magician points to the reconcilability of the seemingly irreconcilable, the unknown with the known, and mystery with problem. In Heideggerian terminology, one could say that the magician is pointing to the reconcilability of the nothing with the something. After all, it was Heidegger, quoting Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), who asked the question: “Why is there Being at all—why not far rather Nothing?”⁷⁹ The question of Being is a question that presupposes what it questions. The question is already in the midst of Being.

That which is absent can reveal for us that which is present. The nothing can help us in understanding the something or even, for that matter Being itself. From the beginning of written history, the magician was known for bringing these ideas together. The magician helps in expelling mystery so that the audience can better understand reality:

Reality is mysterious. Natural phenomena puzzle and frighten us. We turn to those among us in the know for answers—religious leaders, philosophers, scientist. Among the earliest tribal societies—the hunter-gathers as well as incipient agriculturist—natural phenomena were

⁷⁹ Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 257.

perceived as supernatural. Magic was perceived everywhere: in the rocks, in the wind, in the fire, in the water, in plants, in animals, and in the departed. Those who knew how to control magic, those who offered answers—were the shamans.⁸⁰

The magician teaches through myth and attempts to unveil mystery and instigate moments of *alētheia* in spectators. This has been the role of the magician throughout history and this is what the magician has attempted to do, throughout history, with the art of magic.

This can be seen, historically, in the encounter between the Oracle at Delphi and Socrates. It can also be seen in the ancient shamans, *Magi*, and medicine men and women. The story continues through the Judeo-Christian scriptures, from Moses and the magicians, to the Three *Magi* to Simon in the book of the *Acts of the Apostles*. This story goes on through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance era with the alchemists, wizards, *Magi*, and magicians of all types.

Something happened in the modern era. The magician is no longer a teacher, but just another deceiver. Descartes revived Platonic philosophy and restated that an evil genius, (the magician in Platonic thought) may have deceived one into believing that which is not true. While deception has always been a part of magic throughout history, in the modern world this is all magic appears to be for most people. This is why today a good number of the spectators that watch magic want to know how it is done. Since there must be a secret, there must be an answer. This is an assumption that is held by many spectators of the art of magic and through the writings of many magicians. While there are secrets to the tricks that the magician uses to deceive the audience, the deceptions serve a higher purpose. Magic should expose misconceptions, and allow Being to present itself.

⁸⁰ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 21S

Because of philosophers such as Heidegger, who have promoted the questioning of Being and mystery, the magician has the ability to overcome this modern notion of the magician and magic. The magician should once again realize the deep-rooted structure and meaning in the art of magic. Then s/he will better be able to see the connection between the magician and the metaphysician. The magician has always been and should always be a teacher. Magic is a true art, and as magician Peter Samelson rightly says.

I think one of the things we strive for is an element of artistry. And if you approach art, then you really need to ask the question of what art is for or what is it about. And I think that it needs to involve a leap of the imagination. It needs to come to a new way of seeing the world.⁸¹

In this day and age, a lot of magicians and spectators view magic through the lenses of scientific method. While this is part of magic, magic itself is so much more. Magic is an art that the magician uses to initiate moments of *alētheia* and

By contrast, science is not an original happening of truth, but always the cultivation of a domain of truth already opened, specifically by apprehending and confirming that which shows itself to be possibly and necessarily correct within that field. When and insofar as a science passes beyond correctness and goes on to a truth, which means that it arrives at the essential disclosure of beings as such, it is philosophy.⁸²

Like the philosopher's role of arriving at the disclosure of Being, it is the role of the magician to help bring the spectator to an understanding of magic as an art that engages in the same

⁸¹ Waldman and Layden, *The Art of Magic*, 206.

⁸² Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 187.

discourse. If the magician is not open to an existential and/or metaphysical encounter with the other, then neither will the spectator be open.

While performing magic, the magician opens one up to a deeper level of meaning. The magician pulls the spectator into a world of the apparently impossible, where perceived appearances are probably not real. The magician, through his/her performance, has the ability to lead one into a world of mystery where illusions are endless. By performing magic, the magician can open up the doors of possibility and understanding. Performance magic, when properly conceived, has the ability to open one up to moments of *alētheia*:

Performing magic is different. Magic takes us out of the realm of attainable skills, out of the realm of the possible, and into the strange world of the impossible: a world where the impossible is made magically possible. There is a great difference between this and balancing an egg on your nose. If the magician knows when to stop talking, audience members may even enter this strange world where there is no laughter and applause-or where, before any laughter and applause, there is that moment of stunned silence which appears when we come face-to-face with something that we absolutely believed could not be.⁸³

Coming face-to-face with something that one believes cannot be can cause one to think that maybe his/her thoughts on reality could be deepened. It can cause one to think that maybe there is more to this world than what is revealed by pure sense data. This also happens when one encounters the mysterious in philosophical thought and is opened up to a moment of *alētheia*.

⁸³ Eugene Burger, <http://www.Magicbeard.com/view.php?id=28>

The magician is not one who merely entertains. S/he is one who communicates life and the mysteries that surround us all. One may not go to an art museum for the mere purpose of being entertained by the paintings and sculptures. Although like magic, other forms of art can be and often are trivialized, one can go to the art museum for the awe-inspiring paintings and sculptures to help him/her to see deeper into the meanings and mysteries of life. There is an isomorphism in an artwork, a bringing to presence through structural similarities. Take for instance a painting of Christ crucified. This is a painting of a historical figure that evokes many different thoughts and emotions for many people throughout the world. Artworks can evoke emotions and provoke thought so that they are able to invoke a presence through structural similarities.

Art often inspires by creating a sense of awe and wonder. The artist creates the art. Magic is an art, not just a job, game, or hobby, and the magician is an artist, a performer, not simply an employee. Like all artists, the magician creates the artwork, which in the magicians case, is magic. Magic, like other forms of art, is also meant to create a sense of awe and wonder. Let the magical artist create a magical art that points to Being, shows beauty, exposes mystery and entices thought. Let the magician instigate moments of *alētheia*.

Let magic continue to be an art that sparks wonder in every person who sees it. Let the magician communicate not only a cognitive encounter but open up the possibility for an existential and metaphysical encounter between him/herself and the audience. The role of the magician is to expose wonder to everyone whose path s/he crosses. If the magician fulfills the role proper to his/her art, then the stories told about him/her will inculcate wonder to all who hear them.

Theatrical magic as well as street, bar, club and restaurant magic are all some of

today's forms of magic that can be used to help clear an opening for Being to present itself. There are messages conveyed arguably as in any art form through symbols and metaphors. There is a relationship that the magician creates between him/herself and the audience, which I would venture to say, is one of, if not the most crucial element in this dynamic. This is the artist magician at work. There is something special in the art of magic. Through The art of magic, the magician communicates to the audience that Magic is about transformation; it is about the human experience that is constantly being encountered.

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