Magic, Alief and Make-Believe

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Abstract: Leddington (2016) remains the leading contemporary philosophical account of magic, one that has been relatively unchallenged. In this discussion piece, I have three aims; namely, to (i) criticise Leddington's attempt to explain the experience of magic in terms of belief-discordant alief; (ii) explore the possibility that much, if not all, of the experience of magic can be explained by mundane belief-discordant perception; and (iii) argue that make-believe is crucial to successful performances of magic in ways Leddington at best overlooks and at worst denies.

I.

What is involved in experiencing magic, qua magic? According to Jason Leddington (2016), it involves being in a belief-discordant state. Although you believe that people cannot fly, that is what you experience when watching me swoop around the stage before you. Although you believe that coins cannot teleport, that is what you experience when I perform a vanishing coin trick in front of you. Although you believe that people cannot be sawn in half bloodlessly and painlessly, that is what you experience when watching me appear to cut my assistant in two. But what is this 'experience'? One might think that the experience of magic involves states of the imagination. According to Leddington, this idea is mistaken. Experiencing magic does not involve make-believing that people can fly, coins can be teleported, people painlessly cut in two, etc. Instead of being constituted by states of the imagination, the experience of magic is, he claims, constituted by alief.

In the sense introduced by Tamar Gendler (2008), alief is a mental state that is representational, affective and behavioural. It can be triggered both consciously and non-consciously. Aliefs are close cousins of imaginings. Crucially, unlike imaginings, aliefs cannot be triggered at will. But, like imaginings, aliefs can be belief-discordant: just as you can imagine *p* yet believe *not-p*, you can alief *p* yet believe *not-p*.

In this discussion piece, I have three aims; namely, to (i) criticise Leddington's attempt to explain the experience of magic in terms of belief-discordant alief; (ii) explore the possibility that much, if not all, of the experience of magic can be explained by mundane belief-discordant perception; and (iii) argue that make-believe is crucial to successful performances of magic. On this last score, I do not argue that in the experience of magic you make-believe that someone can fly, make-believe that the coin has teleported or make-believe that a person has been sawn in half, etc. Nevertheless I do suggest that make-believe plays a crucial role in successful performances of magic that Leddington at best overlooks and at worst denies—so crucial, in fact, that it is reasonable to say that magic takes place in a make-believe context.

II.

Leddington (2016) makes a number of claims about magic and the experience of magic. I focus on the following:

> **MAKE**: A successful magic performance does not involve the audience make-believing any proposition.

> **EXP**: The experience of magic, qua magic, is constituted by belief-discordant alief.

Leddington has many illuminating things to say about magic and performances of magic. But I argue that both of the above claims should be rejected. I begin by arguing against **EXP**. In the course of doing so, I shall sketch some lines of argument in favour of a rival claim, **PER**.

> **PER**: The experience of magic, qua magic, is constituted by belief-discordant perception.

III.

Leddington's case for **EXP** falls short on in least three respects. First, Leddington fails to successfully eliminate plausible competing hypotheses about which psychological states constitute the experience of magic. Second, he fails to give positive arguments for **EXP**. Third, there is a mismatch between the affective, behavioural and rational features of alief and the affective, behavioural and rational features of the experience of magic. This shows that aliefs are likely the wrong kind of state to appeal to in order to explain the experience of magic.

In terms of eliminating competing hypotheses, Leddington examines whether the experience of magic could be an intra-belief conflict, an unwilling suspension of disbelief or a willing suspension of disbelief. Leddington convincingly argues that none of these fits the bill, especially when it comes to the intra-belief conflict hypothesis—after all, the magician does not aim to make people *believe* that someone is genuinely flying before them or that a person is really being sawn in half, a point I return to throughout. But as a menu of potential hypotheses regarding the belief-discordant state constitutive of the experience of magic, the list is woefully short. What Leddington neglects to consider is whether the experience of magic involves states like perceptual experiences or perceptual seemings (Brogaard 2013); or recalcitrant emotions (D'arms and Jacobson 2003); or something like the meta-cognitive feeling of surprise (Martin & Dokic 2013). All three types of mental state can be formed involuntarily, all three can be belief-discordant and all three have a distinctive phenomenology or affect. As such, conflicts between these states and belief are no less suitable candidates for explaining the experience of magic than are the options considered by Leddington. Indeed, perceptual states, emotions and meta-cognitive feelings might be considered more suitable, since they each have a distinctive phenomenology. The question of whether cognitive states, like belief and suspensions of belief, have phenomenal character is a matter of significant controversy.

What is particularly surprising about Leddington's discussion is how little he says about the first of these options—belief-discordant perception—in the experience of magic. For one, in order to correctly experience a levitation trick, it had better *look* to the audience as if the magician is levitating. Similarly, it seems essential to correctly experiencing a

person-being-sawn-in-half trick that it *look* as if a person's body has been split in two. Of course, it is a hallmark of perception that it can be belief-discordant, as shown by experience of the Müller-Lyer figure and related illusory experiences.

Leddington does, in one place, acknowledge the presence of belief-discordant perception in the experience of magic. About the experience of watching Copperfield levitate he says:

> At no point does the spectator come to believe that Copperfield is flying. But … it certainly *looks* as though he is, and this suffices to induce the corresponding belief-discordant alief. (259)

Here, Leddington pictures belief-discordant perceptual experiences as mere triggers for belief-discordant aliefs (259), with the latter doing all the explanatory work. But once we posit belief-discordant perceptual states in the audience—whether that is perceptual experiences or perceptual seemings—it is not clear what remains for aliefs to explain, especially if the experience of magic is fundamentally one of "illusions" (256). So Leddington is already somewhat committed to **PER**. Indeed, perceptual states appear capable of the right content to explain the experience of magic. Magic, Leddington claims, involves an experience of the impossible: flight, telekinesis, teleportation, etc. Perception can represent impossible situations, as illustrated by experience of impossible figures and related phenomena (Macpherson 2010). It might be that perception can even represent logical impossibilities (Crane 1988, 143).

Of course, there may be very good reasons for rejecting **PER** by itself as a comprehensive theory of the experience of magic or for needing to supplement it with **EXP**. But if there are, then Leddington does not say what they are.

All told, Leddington reaches for aliefs too quickly in order to explain the experience of magic, while leaving unexamined competing hypotheses (again, **PER** is just one example) that are no less *prima facie* plausible. This is no small matter, given how controversial aliefs have proven to be (Currie and Ichino 2012; Kwong 2012; Mandelbaum 2013).

Moreover, Leddington fails to give convincing positive arguments for **EXP** and why aliefs, in particular, are the right state to appeal to in order to explain the experience of magic. Aliefs are, as Leddington notes, defined by certain behavioural and affective

properties (more on these below). What these are in the case of the experience of magic, Leddington declines to say (258). This is a significant gap. And, although he says he will take up this matter another time, it is not clear that aliefs fit for purpose. There are three problems here.

First, the affective properties characteristic of alief seem inappropriate for explaining the experience of magic, and by Leddington's own lights. For instance, Leddington claims that the experience of magic is akin to the Kantian mathematical sublime (260): it involves you being unable to explain what is present before you (i.e. how, precisely the magic trick was done), while you remain secure in the knowledge that it is, at the end of the day, 'just a trick'—meaning that you are certain that it must, somehow, be explicable. Yet many of the examples of putatively alief-involving situations Gendler originally sought to draw attention to involve affect overloading reason, or at least coming very close. Consider Gendler's classic example of walking on the Grand Canyon Skywalk, which Leddington outlines by way of explaining the experience of magic: despite believing that you are perfectly safe, when you walk on the glass platform overhanging the canyon you nonetheless represent, via alief, the content [Really high up with no support!], experience a distinctive affect [Unsafe!] and are strongly motivated in behavioural terms [Must get off!]. As Leddington says (257), walking on the Grand Canyon Skywalk is an affectively "harrowing" experience. Seeing a person sawn in half at a magic show, however, is not. So then it seems unlikely that audiences alief the content [Person sawn in half!] as part of experiencing the trick. Now, it might be that there are other examples of alief, where affect is not so heightened, and which would serve as a better analogy for the experience of magic. However, Gendler's Skywalk is the only example of alief that Leddington discusses. It is therefore reasonable to hold that he considers it to be both paradigmatic of aliefs in general and analogous to the experience of magic in particular.

Second, Gendler claims that belief-discordant aliefs involve irrationality. The person on the Skywalk believes that they are safe, yet aliefs otherwise—they are itching to get off. They are therefore under rational pressure to sort things out in their mind: do they consider themselves unsafe or not? As Gendler (2008, 651) puts it, belief-discordant aliefs involve "violating certain norms of cognitive-behavioural coherence," leaving one open to "criticism". But in watching Copperfield flit around the stage, while nonetheless believing that he cannot fly, I am not open to any rational criticism. You violate no norms of cognitive-

behavioural coherence merely by appreciating magic. The explanation for this is that the experience of magic, qua magic, is not intrinsically irrational. But then belief-discordant aliefs are ineligible to explain the experience. An aside: if this is right, then it would seem to favour **PER**, since conflicts between belief and perception are not irrational (Helm 2001, 42—43; Brady 2007, 276).

In relation to this last point, regarding the non-irrationality of experiencing magic, it is instructive to note that aliefs were largely introduced by Gendler to explain certain puzzling forms of human behaviour (2008, 637—639). But whatever is puzzling about magic performances or the experience of magic, it is not the behaviour of audiences that cries out for explanation. This again suggests that alief is not the right mental state to explain the experience of magic. The case would be different if audience members were motivated to rush to the aid of the assistant sawn in half—just as I am motivated to rush from the Skywalk—but of course they are not.

Granted, audiences of magic sometimes (but not always) gasp, laugh, and so on. Is this behaviour puzzling? Possibly so, given that audiences disbelieve that, say, someone is flying before them. But **PER**, which Leddington is already partly committed to, supplies two explanations here. First, having a visual experience of someone flying is sufficient for you to gasp or laugh. It is, after all, an extremely unusual sight. Second, your astonishment or amusement can be further explained by you seeing someone flying while fully believing that it is not possible for people to fly. This perception-belief discord is sufficient to prompt wonderment and awe at how the trick was achieved. After all, if you visually experience a magician to be doing *E* while firmly believing that *E*-ing is impossible, you will naturally wonder how the magician made it look like *E* is occurring, i.e. how the effect ('trick') was pulled off. Explaining audiences' behaviour in this way, by reference to belief-discordant perception, is preferable to **EXP** insofar as it avoids postulating irrationality in audiences.

In sum, mundane belief-discordant perception, coupled with the relatively humdrum mental states that they are likely to trigger (surprise, puzzlement, wonder, etc.), renders redundant psychological exotica like aliefs in explaining audiences' behaviour and avoids introducing irrationality.

IV.

Let us now turn to **MAKE**. Although Leddington does not explicitly affirm **MAKE** in the way he explicitly affirms **EXP**, it is reasonable to infer his support for **MAKE**, given various claims that he makes about imagination and make-believe playing no constitutive role in the experience of magic (255).

Start by considering Leddington's claim that the experience of magic crescendos into an aporetic-like state of bafflement (261). The idea is that audiences are stumped by what is occurring on the state and consider a range of possible explanations. Was it mirrors? A doppelganger? Wires? Coming up short, the audience remains in a state of perplexity. However, on Leddington's view, it is not that viewers believe that there is *no* explanation or, worse still, that the magician *actually* has powers of levitation, telekinesis or teleportation. Audiences believe there must be some explanation for how the spectacle was achieved—if only they could know what it is. Leddington puts the idea like this:

> [T]he spectator's attitude is: "There *must* be an explanation, but I have no idea how there could be. All the possibilities seem to have been exhausted." (261)

An important question remains: what attitude does the audience take toward this last proposition, 'all possible explanations seem to have been exhausted'? Leddington does not say. Notice that it should not be an attitude of belief. For if viewers believe that all possible explanations for the trick have been exhausted, or at least seem to be, then they would simply end up believing that the magician does have powers of levitation, telekinesis or teleportation. But as Leddington rightly points out, and as I have stressed above, it is crucial to the experience of magic, qua magic, that audiences believe that they are *not* seeing, e.g., a person actually being sawn in half. That would not elicit an experience of magic, but one of horror. Still, to successfully experience and appreciate magic, audiences need to represent, in some part of their psychology, the proposition 'all possible explanations have been exhausted'. Leddington seems right about that. In closing, I shall suggest that audiences make-believe this proposition. That is, successful theatrical magic is partly constituted by the pretence that no explanation for the trick being performed is possible.

V.

It is essential to a successful magical performance that various physical objects and mechanisms are concealed from the audience's line of sight. After all, if you could see the wires or platform used in a levitation trick, then the spell would be broken—the trick would fail and you would not experience magic. What is more, not only are such devices present, but audiences believe that they are. Again, if they did not, they would take magic too literally.

At the same time, however, the magician often represents to the audience the exact opposite: that everything causally responsible for the trick is, in fact, in plain sight—the magician shows that there is nothing up their sleeves, no rabbit already in their hat, no hidden compartments in the box, etc. Representing such things to the audience, the magician does not, themselves, believe such propositions to be true. It would be a weird kind of magician who needed false beliefs about their props, or who required believing that they have supernatural powers, in order to perform. Rather, the magician's representing that there is nothing up their sleeves, etc. is to be analysed as the magician's *pretending* that there is nothing up their sleeves (or hidden from sight more generally). And in doing this, the magician is, among other things, inviting the audience to play along too. After all, the magician does not aim to get the audience to *believe* that there is nothing up their sleeves, no rabbit already in their hat, no hidden compartments in the box, etc. For were the magician successful in getting the audience to believe these propositions (and that, more generally) everything causally relevant for the trick is in plain sight, then the audience would not be able to have an experience of magic—they would experience the magician as actually having supernatural powers. Thus, in order to avoid picturing both magician and audience as believing that the magician is performing actual levitation, actual telekinesis or actual teleportation, magic should be understood to involve a shared pretence between audience and magician that everything is open to view and that nothing causally relevant for the trick is hidden from sight.

If this idea is right, and much more would have to be said for it to be fully persuasive, then it is not simply that make-believe plays *some* role in theatrical magic. It would be more accurate to say that performances of theatrical magic take place against a background of shared pretence; or, alternatively, that pretence on the part of magician and audience that everything causally relevant for the trick is in plain sight constitutes an enabling condition

for the experience of magic to occur at all—whether that experience is then analysed along the lines of **PER** or **EXP**.

Leddington denies that the belief-discordant state constitutive of experiences of magic is imagination—we have seen he thinks it is an alief. But he can agree that imagination plays *some* roles in magic. So to what extent is Leddington's view challenged by the above observations? Minimally, we can say that make-believe plays an important role in enabling the experience of magic that Leddington neglects in his analysis.

However, we can also say something stronger. Sometimes, Leddington commits to the claim that there is *no* relation between make-believe and magical performances (in general, not just experiences):

> Magic performances are not fictions, not props in games of make-believe… To treat them as invitations to fantasy is precisely to miss the point. (256)

If what I have said above is right, then this last claim is false. For magic to be successfully experienced, as magic, magician and audience must pretend (not believe) that everything is in plain sight. So make-believe plays an essential role in successful performances of magic that Leddington at best overlooks and at worst seems to deny. Either way, it is foundational for our understanding of theatrical magic, and for understanding the experience of theatrical magic in particular, that it takes place in a shared context of make-believe, lest we introduce belief where it should not be.[1]

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