

The Experience of Magic

Jason Leddington

Despite its enduring popularity, theatrical magic remains all but ignored by art critics, art historians, and philosophers.¹ It is easy to understand why. The world of magic has long had an uneasy relationship with two thoroughly disreputable worlds: the world of the supposedly supernatural—the world of psychics, mediums, and other charlatans—and the world of the con—the world of cheats, hustlers, and swindlers. Moreover, magic has undergone a tremendous decline in the last century, thanks largely to the advent of film and television. Once among the most popular and profitable forms of public entertainment, magic is now widely ridiculed as a sideshow art better suited to children's parties and the absurdity of the Las Vegas strip than to realms of "serious" art and culture. Lastly, it is quite rare to witness a live performance by a skilled, theatrically polished, and thoughtful magician. (The majority of professional magicians do not meet this standard.) All of this points to an "art" deserving dismissal.

Nevertheless, longstanding critical inattention to magic is unfortunate in at least four ways. First, public interest in live magic performance seems to be on the rise. In 2013, a large-scale touring show, *The Illusionists*, sold 31,000 tickets for \$3 million in nine days in Sydney and 42,000 tickets for \$2.2 million in eight days in Mexico City. Since *The Illusionists* did this without any household names on the marquee, it is clear that the public was coming for a magic show, not some celebrity fan-fest (2014c). At the same time, two young card magicians with a conceptual-artistic bent—Derek Delgaudio and Helder Guimarães—were breaking box office records at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles and the Pershing Square

Signature Center in New York City with their show, *Nothing to Hide* (2014b). So, the perhaps surprising fact is that theatrical magic is an important contemporary art form that—it is fair to assume, given the lack of critical attention—is badly understood.²

Second, recent historical scholarship has highlighted the importance of theatrical magic as a cultural force in Europe and the U.S. throughout the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th.³ Not only were touring magicians the first “global” entertainment superstars, magic gained credibility as a sophisticated theatrical art.⁴ Moreover, the public’s interest in magic was inseparable from its conflicted fascination with both science and the occult. Magic performances were sometimes presented alongside—or even as—scientific demonstrations, and magicians such as John Neville Maskelyne made names for themselves by debunking spiritualist “humbugs” such as the Davenport brothers.⁵ Understanding magic is thus valuable for understanding the social, intellectual, and aesthetic climate of an especially important recent historical period.

The third—and, for my purposes, most significant—reason that critical inattention to magic is unfortunate is that it offers a unique and distinctively intellectual aesthetic experience. On this point, here is one of the most thoughtful and creative performers working today, Teller of *Penn & Teller*:

[Y]ou experience magic as real and unreal at the same time. It's a very, very odd form, compelling, uneasy, and rich in irony.... A romantic novel can make you cry. A horror movie can make you shiver. A symphony can carry you away on an emotional storm; it can go straight to the heart or the feet. But magic goes straight to the brain; its essence is intellectual. (Stromberg 2012)

Following Teller’s lead, the purpose of this article is to initiate a philosophical investigation of the experience of magic with a focus on its cognitive dimension. This is a first step toward giving magic performance the proper critical attention it deserves. Moreover, since, as discussed below, the distinctive aim of theatrical magic is to produce an experience as of an

impossible event, this article is also a first step toward a general aesthetics of the impossible, and so, of *antinomic*—and not merely *anomalous*—experience. A more complete theory will address related (and similarly neglected) phenomena such as drawings of impossible figures (e.g., Reutersvärd, Escher), impossible sculptures (e.g., Andrus, Tabary, Hamaekers), and even impossible music (e.g., Shepard tones, Risset rhythms), as well as substantial connections to related aesthetic domains.⁶

Finally, the fourth reason that magic deserves critical attention is that it raises a host of interesting philosophical and psychological questions that go well beyond the hypothesis that we can learn something about the mind by studying how magicians fool us.⁷ In this article, I argue that magic involves a distinctive form of theatrical depiction and that there are considerable parallels between the experience of magic and both the Kantian sublime and Socratic aporia. In other work, I argue that reflection on magic yields a new twist on a traditional aesthetic paradox, the resolution of which highlights magic's relevance to recent work in the psychology of explanation as well as rich and unexplored connections between magic and horror and humor.⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, magic does not fit neatly into our usual aesthetic categories—*precisely* why it so rewards reflection.

The article is in four parts. The first part dispels two widespread misconceptions about the nature of magic and discusses the special sort of depiction it requires. Part two asks, “What cognitive attitude is involved in the experience of magic?” and criticizes three candidate replies; part three then argues that Tamar Szabó Gendler's notion of “belief-discordant alief” holds the key to a correct answer (Gendler 2008: 641). On this basis, part four develops an account of the cognitive dimension of the experience of magic and explores some of its consequences. The result is a philosophically rich account of the

experience of magic that opens new avenues for inquiry and is directly relevant to core issues in contemporary aesthetics.

I. What Is Magic?

To begin, it is important to address two common misconceptions about theatrical magic.

First, it is widely believed that the magician's primary goal is to fool the audience. This may be true of some professional performers that bill themselves as magicians, and it is clearly true of many amateurs who do “magic tricks.” However, most magicians are interested in much more than trickery: they regard deception merely as a *means* to creating a certain type of theatrical event. Darwin Ortiz, a prominent magician who has written extensively on the theory of magic performance, explains: “Magic is not simply about deceiving. It’s about creating an illusion, the illusion of impossibility” (2006: 15). *This* is the sort of performance that interests me here—and that most deserves to be called ‘magic’.

Second, there is the misconception that the magician aims to convince the audience of the existence of supernatural powers. This is what leads some people to respond to the threat of a magic performance by announcing, “I don’t believe in that stuff.” But while some professional and amateur performers indisputably engage in this sort of charlatanry, most magicians do not claim to possess special powers. In large part, this is because they understand that the belief that magic is “real” actually *thwarts* their aesthetic aims. As discussed below, the audience’s active *disbelief* is a critical ingredient in the experience of magic.

So, if magic is neither charlatanry nor (mere) deception, what is it? Here, again from Teller, is a candidate definition: “Magic is a form of theater that depicts impossible events as

though they were really happening” (Stromberg 2012). Not charlatanry, but theater—and no mention of deception! In any case, Teller’s definition deserves unpacking. To this end, it is instructive to distinguish between:

(A) depicting events as though they were happening...;

and

(B) depicting events as though they were *really* happening....

Theater and film are well suited to depicting events as though they were happening, but depicting events as though they were *really* happening is typical of neither. Macbeth is not (usually?) depicted as murdering Duncan *now, here*, in the theater, and a screening of *Casablanca* does not depict the events in Rick’s Café as unfolding *now*, whether in the cinema or in Morocco. To depict an event as though it were *really* happening is neither to depict it as happening in some other possible world nor to depict it as happening at some other time. Instead, to depict an event as though it were really happening is to depict it as happening *now*, in *this* world—usually, wherever the act of depiction takes place. In this case, what is depicted is depicted as actually happening right in front of the audience, perhaps even *to* the audience. Consequently, to depict events as though they are really happening is to break the theatrical “fourth wall” between the audience and the action on stage. In this respect, the magician resembles the stage actor less than the standup comic, who speaks directly to the audience, and whose act, even if scripted, often incorporates improvisatory and audience-interactive elements.

“Really happening” depictions are modally distinctive. It is one thing to depict events as happening in a merely possible present—and so, in the world as it might have been—but a magic performance depicts events as happening in the *actual* present—and so, in the world as it is. On this account, modal properties can figure in a performance’s depictive content.

This idea is controversial, presumably because modal properties are supposed to be of the wrong sort for depiction. On such a view, a performance cannot strictly speaking depict an event as “really happening;” instead, that we should so understand it is “implicated” by the context of the performance—for instance, by the fact that the marquee says ‘Magic Show’.⁹ However, for reasons that lie beyond the scope of this article, I think that we should reject the idea that the depictive content of a performance (or film, or picture) can be specified independently of the occasion of its presentation.¹⁰ And absent a representational “core” that can be thus specified, I see no principled reason to suppose that modal properties cannot figure in depictive contents.

Still, there is more to performing magic than depicting impossible events as though they are really happening. A successful magic performance *appears to present* an impossible event, but it is possible to depict an event as though it is really happening without appearing to present it. In particular, a “really happening” depiction may be *fictional* in Kendall Walton’s sense of functioning as a prop in a game of make-believe (Walton 1990: ch. 1). Children playing at wizardry may make-believe that they are *actually* casting spells on the cat, and so, depict impossible events as though they are really happening. However, their act of depiction does not appear to present what it depicts: the children do not actually appear to be casting spells! By contrast, it is essential to a magic performance that *impossible events actually appear to happen*. So, it turns out that functioning as fiction—as a prop in a game of make-believe in which the spectator *imagines* that an impossible event is taking place—is, at best, orthogonal to the intentions of a magic performance. The spectator should not be called on to imagine that the impossible is happening, because it should already *appear* so. In this respect, magical depiction is not fiction; rather, it consists in the *illusion* that an impossible event is really happening.¹¹ Thus, Teller’s definition needs modification: magic is a form of theater that not

merely depicts impossible events as though they are really happening, it *appears to present* them. This, of course, is why it requires deception.

Still, in order for a given performance to be “magical,” yet a further condition must be met: the audience must *believe* that what they are apparently witnessing is, in fact, impossible. It is no good if the depicted event is impossible but the audience believes otherwise. This is what makes it difficult to perform magic for young children: they do not have a good grasp of the limits of the possible. Similarly, consider performing a mind-reading routine for an audience that believes in psychic phenomena: they might marvel at your “powers,” but they will not experience what you do as magical, because they will not experience it as impossible.¹² *This* is why, as mentioned above, the magician does *not* want you to believe that magic is real; rather, you should believe that it is impossible, yet—as far as you can tell—it is happening anyway. *This* is the cognitive bind the magician wants you in.

If, as discussed above, modal properties can figure in depictive contents, then these reflections suggest that the impossibility of the depicted event is actually part of what a magic performance depicts. In this case, not only is the depicted event *in fact* impossible, it is *represented* as impossible. Thus, further updating Teller’s definition, I propose to define magic as a form of theater that apparently presents impossible events *and at the same time* represents them as impossible. In other words, magic apparently presents impossibilities—as *impossibilities*. The result, in Teller’s words, is “a very, very odd form,” in which events are represented “as real and unreal at the same time.” So, not only is the magician’s claim—say, to be able to make a coin vanish—essentially ironic (because it occurs within a performative context in which that very act is recognized as impossible), the vanishing act itself has an ironic structure: it appears to be what it simultaneously admits cannot be. And note that treating the impossibility of the coin-vanish as ingredient in its depiction does not require

that the magician *say* or otherwise make explicit that coin-vanishing is impossible. That its impossibility nevertheless figures in its depiction is suggested by the fact that someone who responds to the performance by saying, “Oh come on, you can’t *really* vanish coins,” is correctly said not to “get” what the magician is doing.¹³

II. Three Hypotheses

We are now in a position to ask, “What is involved in the experience of magic?” It has both cognitive and affective dimensions, and while they are closely related, the cognitive side is primary. It is my focus here.¹⁴ The question is: “How does magic affect cognitive states such as knowledge and belief?” Given that magic is a theatrical art, an obvious hypothesis is:

(H1) The experience of magic essentially involves willing suspension of disbelief.

In fact, as Ortiz notes, this hypothesis is widely accepted by practicing magicians;¹⁵ however, it is clearly false. “Suspending disbelief” is playing make-believe; so, the suspension of disbelief relegates the theatrical event to the realm of fantasy. And while it is surely true that occasional witnesses to a good magic performance will “play along” and indulge in the fantasy that the magic is real, this is not essential to—and *actually interferes with*—the experience of magic. The *whole force* of a magic performance consists in the fact that the audience knows that what they are apparently witnessing is, in fact, impossible. But if the impossible event is relegated to the realm of fantasy via suspension of disbelief, then it is no longer apparently witnessed at all. As discussed above, magic performances are not fictions, not props in games of make-believe; they are illusions. To treat them as invitations to fantasy is precisely to miss the point.

To drive this point home, here is an example from Ortiz (2011: 25). Compare a Broadway performance of Peter Pan to David Copperfield's flying illusion. Suppose that you see the wires holding Peter Pan aloft; does this interfere with your experience of the play? Not at all: you can still willingly suspend disbelief. By contrast, suppose that you see wires moving David Copperfield through the air. This completely destroys the performance, and not because it interferes with some fantasy of flight, but because you are no longer witness to an apparently impossible event.

Here, then, is a second hypothesis, due, again, to Teller:

(H2) The experience of magic essentially involves unwilling suspension of disbelief (Stromberg).

What this hypothesis captures is the involuntary nature of our response to a well-executed magic performance. You do not *decide* to respond to Copperfield as though he is really flying; rather, a successful performance somehow *forces* this response from you. (Teller elsewhere describes magic performance as a kind of “theatrical rape” (Swiss 1995: 492).¹⁶) Thus, if suspension of disbelief is important to the experience of magic, it is not *willing* suspension of disbelief. Still, for the reasons I detailed above, focusing on the notion of suspension of disbelief misses the point. Whether it is willing or unwilling, suspension of disbelief relegates the impossible event to the realm of fantasy, and so, prevents us from apparently witnessing it at all. To put the point another way: *active disbelief* is an essential ingredient in the theatrical experience of magic; that is, the audience should actively disbelieve that what they are apparently witnessing is possible.¹⁷ This is why it is a sign of a successful performance when an audience member exclaims, “No way!” or, “Impossible!”—hardly appropriate responses to mere fantasy. In sum, then, the problem with giving suspension of disbelief a central role in an account of the experience of magic is that it cannot do justice to the cognitive dissonance this experience involves.

Focusing on the idea that cognitive dissonance is essential to the experience magic immediately suggests the following hypothesis:

(H3) The experience of magic essentially involves *conflict of belief*.

On this hypothesis, Copperfield is successful only if he gets you to somehow *believe and disbelieve* that he is flying. But presumably Copperfield's audience does not typically come to believe a contradiction, no matter how good his performance. The experience of magic is an experience neither of forced fantasy nor of inadvertent self-contraction. There is cognitive dissonance in it, but not the sort that demands resolution on pain of contradiction. The audience never really believes that Copperfield is flying—that magic is real—any more than the frightened audience of *The Exorcist* really believes that Regan is possessed by the demon Pazuzu.¹⁸ So, the right account of the experience of magic must include an account of cognitive dissonance that is not a matter of conflicting beliefs. The next section suggests that Szabó Gendler's notion of "belief-discordant alief" might just do the trick.

III. Alieving in Magic

To motivate introducing the theoretical concept of alief, Szabó Gendler considers the experience of walking on the Grand Canyon Skywalk. The Skywalk is a transparent horseshoe-shaped cantilever bridge that extends over 70 feet beyond the edge of the canyon and hangs nearly 1000 feet in the air. Unsurprisingly, walking on the Skywalk can be a harrowing experience. Still, thousands of tourists do it every year, and presumably they *know* that they are safe. Nevertheless, a normal person who walks out on the bridge for the first time is, in some measure, conflicted about doing so. How should we describe this conflict?

Szabó Gendler convincingly argues that we should understand it as a tension between belief and a more primitive, non-doxastic, representational mental state she calls *alief*. She explains:

A paradigmatic alief is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or nonconsciously—by features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment (Gendler 2008: 642)

On her analysis of the Skywalk, the visual stimulus induced by the transparent bridge causes a mental state with the following associatively linked contents:

- Representational: *Really high up; no support!*
- Affective: *Unsafe!*
- Behavioral: *Get off!*

There are two points to note here. First, *belief* involves *endorsement* of a representational content. By contrast, in *alief*, a representational content is present in the subject’s cognitive system, but it is *not* endorsed. Still, it is associatively linked to affective and behavioral contents, so it is not *idle*: it makes you feel, and inclines you to act, in certain ways. Second, alief is distinct from imagination. While “we can (for the most part) imagine at will, we do not seem to have the same sort of freedom in alief” (Gendler 2008: 651). Moreover, there is no cognitive conflict involved in imagining that not-*p* while believing that *p*; or, as Szabó Gendler puts it, in doing this, “I am violating no norms.” By contrast,

...if I believe that P and alieve that not-P, something is amiss. Learning that not-P may well not cause me to cease alieving that P—but if it does not, then...I am violating certain norms of cognitive-behavioral coherence. No such criticism is possible in the analogous case of imagining. (Gendler 2008: 651)

Here, then, we have a type of cognitive conflict that is passively-incurred, has affective and behavioral consequences, and is not a matter of conflicting belief. The question is whether it can be applied to yield a plausible account of the experience of magic.

Consider the following passage from Ortiz:

[F]orget about creating willing suspension of disbelief. Get your audience to actually believe in magic.... [But how] can you make a sophisticated, modern audience believe in magic? You can't, if you're talking about intellectual belief. I'm talking about emotional belief. An anecdote from the 19th century perfectly captures the difference between intellectual and emotional belief. Madam De Duffand was asked whether she believed in ghosts. She responded, "No. But I am afraid of them." (2011: 25–6)

Ortiz characterizes the cognitive dissonance at the heart of the experience of magic as a conflict between "intellectual belief" and "emotional belief." Intellectually, the audience knows that magic is impossible; but on a more primitive, emotional level, a good performance induces them to "believe" it is actually happening. This seems very much like the contrast between belief and alief. It is easy to imagine someone standing on the Skywalk saying, "*Intellectually*, I believe—I *know*—that I'm safe; but *emotionally*, I believe that I'm in danger." So, my suggestion is that the same theoretical tool that Szabó Gendler introduces to handle the problem of our resistance to walking out on the perfectly safe Skywalk can be used to give an account of the cognitive dissonance that is essential to the experience of magic:

(H4) The experience of magic essentially involves a *belief-discordant alief* that an impossible event is happening.¹⁹

If this is correct—and it deserves much deeper consideration—the question arises: "What are the affective and behavioral contents of magical alief?" That is, how does such an alief make you feel, and what does it make you want to do? I take up these questions in other work.²⁰ In the meantime, however, the point of a magic performance is not simply to generate cognitive dissonance by inducing an alief that an impossible event is happening, but to *maximize* this dissonance. Only then does the spectator have a properly "magical" experience. The final section of this article defends this claim and articulates some of its consequences.

IV. The Experience of Magic

The best way to understand the experience of magic is to consider what undermines it. Take Copperfield's flying illusion. If you see the wires, you cannot have an experience of magic. But concealing the wires is not enough, either, for if you so much as *suspect* that there are wires, you cannot have an experience of magic (no matter how good the illusion). In general, suspecting that you know how a magic performance is accomplished is enough to ruin it. And since, when witnessing the apparent presentation of an impossibility, you typically *will* have some ideas about possible methods, the magician has to do more than conceal the actual method—namely, “cancel” all the methods that might reasonably occur to you.²¹ Only then are you likely to have the sort of experience the magician wants you to have. As Ortiz writes:

Magic can only be established by a process of elimination. There is no way that you can directly apprehend that you're witnessing magic. You conclude that it's magic because there is no alternative. Therefore, the primary task in giving someone the experience of witnessing magic is to eliminate every other possible cause. (Ortiz 2006: 37)²²

It is very helpful to consider a concrete example. Consider again David Copperfield's flying illusion, which, despite the schmaltzy theatrics, is perhaps the best flying illusion ever performed. For each stage of the performance, we can see that Copperfield takes pains to cancel the various methods that might occur to a spectator.²³

Stage I. Lying face up, Copperfield rises stiffly off the stage. A reasonably intelligent spectator thinks: “He must be lying on a board.”

Stage II. 20 feet in the air, Copperfield rotates into a vertical position. The spectator thinks: “So, no board; but of course there are wires attached to his back.”

Stage III. Copperfield does a full somersault in midair. Spectator: “Ah, so the wires can't be attached to his back; still, there must be wires.”

Stage IV. Copperfield flies through a series of spinning metal hoops. “Huh? How can there be wires? Maybe they somehow rotate them to avoid the hoops?”

Stage V. Copperfield flies into a glass box, is shut inside, flies around inside the box, and flies out when the cover is removed. “What the...? Clearly there can't be wires. What else? Magnets? A fan? No. None of that makes sense. I'm completely baffled. This seems altogether impossible. And yet, it's happening. I don't know what to say.”

At no point does the spectator come to believe that Copperfield is flying. But even at Stage I, it certainly *looks* as though he is, and this suffices to induce the corresponding belief-discordant alief. Thus, the performance immediately produces cognitive dissonance in the spectator; and, as Linda Zagzebski points out, the natural, immediate response to such “psychic dissonance” is to try to restore harmony.²⁴ In this case, there are three options. First, the spectator can try to dislodge the alief that Copperfield is flying. But since the illusion is robust, the alief refuses to budge.²⁵ Second, the spectator can try to revise the belief that it is impossible for Copperfield to fly. But this is rationally unacceptable—at least in part because it would generate more psychic dissonance than it would resolve. Third, if neither alief nor belief will budge, the spectator can at least try to *mitigate* their discord by devising a plausible explanation for the appearance of impossibility. *This* is the natural, immediate response to an effective magical illusion: the spectator struggles to minimize cognitive dissonance by explaining away appearances. But the point of the strategy of canceling methods is precisely to thwart this attempt, and so, to *maximize* the cognitive dissonance that spectators experience by depriving them of any means to mitigate it. There are several things to note here.

First, the experience of magic occurs *only* when the spectator has a belief-discordant alief in the impossible that—thanks to the cancellation of methods—he or she *sees no way to rationalize*. In Copperfield's performance, as described above, this happens only at Stage V: only then does the spectator enjoy the experience of an apparent impossibility *absent any*

resources to explain it away. The experience of magic is, therefore, the result of an “intellectual process” (Ortiz 2006: 36). With sleeves rolled up and hands shown empty, I borrow a coin and apparently pass it from my right hand to my left fist. After a magical gesture, I open my fist: no coin! If well executed, this sequence will occasion a belief-discordant alief that the coin has vanished. Impressive, surprising—but not yet magical. An intelligent spectator will soon look to my other hand. Only when I *also* show it empty will he or she (perhaps) undergo the total bafflement constitutive of the experience of magic.

Second, there is more to the experience of magic than not knowing how a trick is done. The latter requires only being deceived as to its method. For instance, in Copperfield’s flying illusion, at no point does the audience *know* how the illusion is produced. They are deceived throughout. However, only at Stage V, when they lose their grip on how the illusion *could be* produced by natural means, do they actually have the experience of magic. What was at first a “puzzle” to be solved (“How does he hook up the wires? Why aren’t they visible?”) comes, via the bafflement of the intellect, to “suggest the operation of something outside of normal cause and effect” (LePaul 1987: 129).²⁶

Third, in general, the greater the distance between performer and audience, the more difficult it is to produce the experience of magic. Just as greater distances make it easier to create illusions of impossibility, they make it harder to cancel methods effectively. Spectators are likely believe (usually correctly) that if they had a closer look, they would see through the illusion. Thus, “stage magic” is almost always less powerful than “close-up magic,” which takes place right in front of the spectator and more easily leaves the impression that everything is open to view. (When Suzanne, the only woman to have won “Close-Up Magician of the Year” from the Academy of Magical Arts, apparently transforms a few blank pieces of paper into a regular deck of playing cards right under your nose, it can feel like

there is no scene to look behind—unlike, say, in *Copperfield's* flying illusion.) The problem of distance is especially acute when showing magic on TV, where effective performance also requires ruling out the possibility of camera tricks and post-production effects. Thus, most contemporary TV magic is a variant on the sort of reality show pioneered by David Blaine in his 1997 special, *Street Magic*. Blaine's principal innovation was to feature the reactions of ordinary live spectators—their expressions of incredulity, their shouts of “No way!”—as a central part of the recorded show. This brilliant stratagem serves to certify the authenticity of the performance, and thus, apparently cancels the possibility of camera tricks or post-production editing. The TV spectators thus experience the performance vicariously; in effect, Blaine enrolls the live spectators as epistemic guarantors and emotional guides for the TV spectators, who learn what to think and feel about a performance in part by seeing the live audience react. Compare how, according to Noël Carroll, in horror, “the emotional reactions of characters...provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to respond to the monsters in the fiction” (1990: 17–18). Obviously, the horror audience knows that the events depicted in the horror narrative are not really happening, so they take only *emotional*, not *epistemic* cues from the characters. By contrast, it is critical to the *emotional* reactions of Blaine's TV audience that they implicitly regard his live spectators as *epistemically* authoritative vis-à-vis the experience of seeing him live.²⁷ In general, unless a TV viewer has reason to distrust the live audience—that is, reason to think that the performance was stoged—her response will be guided by a principle such as: “If the live audience treats a performance as apparently impossible, then, *ceteris paribus*, I should, too.” (A structurally similar form of emotional and epistemic authority is evident in live competition programs such as *America's Got Talent*, in which the reactions of the (often skeptical) judges are a big part of the show.)

Fourth, it should now be clear exactly how magic engages a spectator's imagination. While fiction *invites* the audience to imagine the depicted event—and the main point of the fiction is to *help* them in this—magic *coerces* the audience into trying to imagine how the illusion of the depicted event might be produced—and the main point of the performance is to *prevent* them from succeeding. So, while the experience of fiction requires imaginative success, the experience of magic consists in a kind of imaginative failure.²⁸

Fifth, it follows that spectators with different cognitive resources may have very different experiences of the very same performance. If the magician's job is to anticipate explanations the audience is likely to consider and to develop a performance that “cancels” them, then performing for, say, a group of engineers may impose different demands than performing for a group of vision scientists. In general, the variety of possible explanations we are capable of imagining for a magical illusion depends on our background knowledge.²⁹

Sixth, the idea of an aesthetic experience involving imaginative failure calls to mind the Kant's conception of the mathematically sublime (Kant 2000: 131–143; Ak. 5: 248–260). Of course, for Kant, “the imagination”—a faculty whose role is to synthesize sensory input for empirical cognition—is quite different from what usually goes under the name. Still, there are parallels worth exploring. On Kant's account, the experience of beauty occurs when the imagination presents the object of sensory awareness to the understanding not, as is usually the case, to be thought under a determinate concept, rather *merely as thinkable* (102–104; Ak. 5: 217–219). Thus, for Kant, to experience the world as beautiful is to experience it as *intelligible*, which means that the experience of beauty is an experience of the *harmony* of the world with our cognitive faculties. By contrast, the experience of magic occurs when you are sensorily presented with an event that, despite your best efforts, *resists* intelligibility. (Confronted by a good performance, it is not uncommon to hear spectators say, “That

makes no sense!”) Similarly, according to Kant, the experience of the mathematically sublime occurs when you encounter something that, because of its size, literally makes no sense to your senses. The sublime object overwhelms the imagination, which fails in its attempt to make the object available for empirical cognition. This cognitive failure is the negative moment in the experience of the mathematically sublime. Critically, however, for Kant, a positive moment follows: unable to cognize the object empirically, you grasp it by means of an idea of reason; in so doing, you experience the superiority of your rational self over your merely animal, empirical nature (140–143; Ak. 5: 257–260). Arguably, the experience of magic has a similar structure: there is a moment of cognitive failure that is nevertheless “contained” by the knowledge that “it’s just a trick.” In this respect, despite being totally baffled, the spectator remains master over the illusion.³⁰

Seventh, the intellectual process that leads to the experience of magic has a very clear philosophical parallel. A series of possible explanations are discounted, leaving the spectator baffled, speechless. This is an *aporetic* process, and it directly mirrors the experience of an interlocutor in a Socratic dialogue. Consider, for instance, what happens in the *Euthyphro*.³¹ A question is posed (“What is piety?” (5d)) and a series of accounts are then offered, each of which is rejected on the basis of new argument:

- “Piety is what I’m doing now” (5d–e)
 - o “But it can’t be, because...” (6d–e)
- “Piety is what is dear to the gods” (7a)
 - o “But it can’t be, because...” (7a–8a)
- etc....

Until, finally, Euthyphro reaches *aporia*, bafflement, and *no longer knows what to say*. Critically, this does *not* mean that Euthyphro—or Socrates, for that matter—thereby gives up on the idea that there *is* a correct account of piety. Rather, the proper aporetic attitude is: “There *must* be a correct account, but I have no idea how there could be. All the possibilities seem to

have been exhausted.”³² Similarly, in the case of magic, the spectator does not give up on the idea that there is an explanation for the apparent impossibility; instead, the 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.” (No wonder, then, that Socrates was sometimes called a “magician” by his contemporaries.)³³ As magician Whit Haydn writes:

The job of the magician is to trap the spectator in this logical conundrum. The result of this is a peculiar mental excitation—a burr under the saddle of the mind. If the operation is performed correctly, the patient will not be able to ignore the problem, but will keep coming back to it again and again. (Haydn 2009: 6)

This could just as well describe the work Socrates performs in an aporetic dialogue: leaving the interlocutor with “a burr under the saddle of the mind.” And just as some of Socrates’s interlocutors recoil from the experience of philosophy, so, too, do some people recoil from the experience of magic. After all, as Haydn writes: “This is a creative and disturbing place to be” (Haydn 2009: 5). Still, of course, there is an important difference between philosophy and magic. The goal of philosophy is not aporia, but *sophia*: wisdom.³⁴ On the other hand, those who love magic seek an aporetic experience for its own sake. The question is why. This, however, I leave for another time.^{35,36}

WORKS CITED

- Aronson, Simon. 1990. *The Aronson Approach*. Savaco, Ltd.
- Barnum, P T. 1866. *The Humbugs of the World*. New York: Carleton.
- Carroll, Noel. 1990. *The Philosophy of Horror: or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge.
- Christian, Magic. 2013. *Johann Nepomuk Hofzinsler: Non Plus Ultra*. Hermetic Press.
- Collingwood, R G. 1938. *The Principles of Art*. London: Clarendon Press.
- De Matos, Luis. 2014. "The Illusionists 2.0." *Genii Magazine*, June.
- During, Simon. 2002. *Modern Enchantments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frazer, James George. 2009. *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion: a New Abridgement From the Second and Third Editions*. Edited by Robert Fraser. Reissue edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1950. *Totem and Taboo*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Gendler, Tamar Szabo. 2008. "Alief and Belief." *The Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10): 634–63.
- Grice, H P. 1975. "Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics*, edited by P Cole and J Morgan, 41–58. New York.
- Grimm, Stephen R. 2008. "Explanatory Inquiry and the Need for Explanation." *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 481–97. doi:10.1093/bjps/axn021.
- Haydn, Whit. 2009. *The Chicago Surprise*. Self-published.
- Higginbotham, Adam. 2014. "The Disillusionist." *The New York Times*, November 9. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/the-unbelievable-skepticism-of-the-amazing-randi.html?_r=0.
- Houdini, Harry. 1924. *A Magician Among the Spirits*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Isherwood, Charles. 2013. "Playing with a Full Deck, and Your Head." *The New York Times*, November 7.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kuhn, Gustav, Aym A Amlani, and Ronald A Rensink. 2008. "Towards a Science of Magic." *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 12 (9): 349–54. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2008.05.008.
- LePaul, Paul. 1987. *The Card Magic of LePaul*. 5 ed. Brooklyn, NY: D. Robbins and Co.
- Levinson, Jerrold. 1998. "Wollheim on Pictorial Representation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (3): 227–33. doi:10.2307/432361.
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien. 1985. *How Natives Think*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Macknik, Stephen L, Mac King, James Randi, Apollo Robbins, Teller, John Thompson, and Susana Martinez-Conde. 2008. "Attention and Awareness in Stage Magic: Turning Tricks Into Research." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 9 (October): 871–79.
- Macknik, Stephen L, Susana Martinez-Conde, and Sandra Blakeslee. 2010. *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals About Our Everyday Deceptions*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Minch, Stephen. 1980. *Secrets of a "Puerto Rican Gambler."*
- Murphie, Andrew. 2003. "The Enchantments of Cultural History: a Review of Simon During's *Modern Enchantments: the Cultural Power of Secular Magic*." *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 30 (October). <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-October-2003/murphie.html>.
- Nadis, Fred. 2005. *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Nelms, Henning. 1969. *Magic and Showmanship: a Handbook for Conjurers*. Mineola, NY: Dover

Publications.

- Nozick, Robert. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ortiz, Darwin. 2006. *Designing Miracles*. Ortiz Publications.
- Ortiz, Darwin. 2011. *Strong Magic*. Ortiz Publications.
- Plato. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M Cooper and D S Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Sankey, Jay. 2003. *Beyond Secrets*. Sankey Magic.
- Stromberg, Joseph. 2012. "Teller Speaks on the Enduring Appeal of Magic." *Smithsonian.com*. Accessed April 13. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Teller-Speaks-on-the-Enduring-Appeal-of-Magic.html>.
- Swiss, Jamy Ian. 1995. "Penn and Teller Exposed." *Genii Magazine*, May.
- Tamariz, Juan. 2014. *The Method of False Solutions and the Magic Way*. Edited by Gema Navarro, Translated by Rafael Benatar. 2nd ed. Seattle, WA: Hermetic Press.
- Thomas, Keith. 1971. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Penguin Books.
- Travis, Charles. 1985. "On What Is Strictly Speaking True." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15 (2): 187–229.
- Travis, Charles. 2008. *Occasion-Sensitivity*. Oxford University Press.
- Walton, Kendall L. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: on the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wollheim, Richard. 1998. "On Pictorial Representation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (3): 217–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/432361>.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 2012. *Epistemic Authority: a Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2003. *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2014a. *About JREF*. Accessed December 25. <http://web.randi.org/about.html>.
- 2014b. *Nothing to Hide NYC*. Accessed May 14. <http://nothingtohiddenyc.com/>.
- 2014c. *The Illusionist Tour*. Accessed May 14. <http://www.theillusionistslive.com/theshow.html>.

¹ By 'theatrical magic' (or simply 'magic') I mean what Simon During calls "secular magic," and so, "not the magic of witches or Siberian shamans—not, in other words, what one writer on the subject of the occult calls 'real and potent magic'—but rather the technically produced magic of conjuring shows..." (2002: 1). Theatrical magic is thus distinct from the sorts of practices that anthropologists (Frazer 2009; Lévy-Bruhl 1985), psychologists (Freud 1950), and historians (Thomas 1971) have traditionally called 'magic'. It is also not what R. G. Collingwood calls "magical art"—namely, "art which... evokes of set purpose some emotions rather than others in order to discharge them into the affairs of practical life" (1938: 69). Even if, as I believe, *part* of the value of theatrical magic is that it aims to produce a response that *can* bear on "practical life," magic does not evoke this response *for* its practical significance.

² On the follow-up to *The Illusionists'* remarkably successful debut tour, see De Matos (2014). For critical reception of *Nothing to Hide*, see Isherwood (2013). Alongside renewed interest in live performance, there has also been a resurgence of magic on television. Among the many examples: *Penn & Teller's Fool Us*, whose first season originally ran in the U.K. in 2011 and which is due for a second consecutive season on the U.S. cable network The CW in 2016; regular appearances by magicians on talent shows such as *America's Got Talent* (won by magician Mat Franco in 2014); the

incredibly successful award-winning U.K. show, *Dynamo: Magician Impossible*, and a 2013 ABC primetime special, *David Blaine: Real or Magic?*, which marked Blaine's return to magic performance after more than a decade focused on endurance stunts. Even independent film has gotten on board, with several feature-length documentaries in recent years, including *Make Believe* (2010), *Deceptive Practice: The Mysteries and Mentors of Ricky Jay* (2012), and *Magicians: The Documentary* (2016). (For discussion of some of the aesthetic challenges in presenting magic on TV and in film, see part four of this article.) The question *why* magic is presently attracting significant public interest is, of course, difficult to answer. Arguably, one factor is our waning fascination with the apparently limitless potential of cinematic special effects. Even the best 3D CGI now seems pedestrian alongside wonders apparently directly accomplished by actual human bodies.

³ See, especially, During's *Modern Enchantments* (2002), apparently "[t]he first major academic work on secular magic" (Murphie 2003). See also Nadis (2005).

⁴ On the "globalization" of theatrical magic in the latter part of the 19th century, see During (2002: chs. 4-5). The cultural legitimation of magic as theatrical art was due in large part to performers such as Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin in Paris and Johann Nepomuk Hofzinsler in Vienna. On Robert-Houdin's enormous influence, see, e.g., During (2002: ch. 4). On Hofzinsler's famous Viennese salon, see Christian (2013: ch. 5).

⁵ P. T. Barnum's *The Humbugs of the World* (1866) features nine chapters debunking spiritualists including the Davenports and the Fox sisters. In the 20th century, the practice of debunking became an important part of the culture of theatrical magic thanks mainly to Harry Houdini (see Houdini 1924) and James "The Amazing" Randi, whose "James Randi Educational Foundation was founded in 1996 to help people defend themselves from paranormal and pseudoscientific claims...[and] offers a still-unclaimed million-dollar reward for anyone who can produce evidence of paranormal abilities under controlled conditions" (2014a). Randi's skepticism is the focus of a recent *New York Times Magazine* profile (Higginbotham 2014).

⁶ To develop and defend a general aesthetics of the impossible with a focus on theatrical magic is the goal of my book project, *The Art of the Impossible* (in progress).

⁷ This is the rather narrow focus of recent work in the "neuroscience of magic," which has received considerable attention in the popular press. See, for example, Macknik et al. (2008), Kuhn et al. (2008), and Macknik et al. (2010).

⁸ See "The Enjoyment of Magic" (in progress).

⁹ Cf. Grice (1975). Jerrold Levinson recommended such a view in his comments on my talk on the experience of magic at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. In so doing, he was motivated "partly" by "considerations developed by Richard Wollheim in his discussion of limits on what states of affairs can be *seen in*, and so potentially *represented by*, a picture" (see Levinson 1998; Wollheim 1998).

¹⁰ More generally, we should follow Charles Travis and reject the idea that the content of a representation can be specified independently of local pragmatic factors. As Travis puts it, what a representation represents is always an occasion-sensitive matter. See, for example, his critique of Gricean semantics in Travis (1985), which is collected alongside other relevant work in Travis (2008).

¹¹ Note that to deny that magic is fiction is not to deny that imagination plays a role in the experience of magic (on the contrary: see part four of this article). The point is just that, unlike props in games of make-believe, magic performances are not invitations to imagine a depicted event. You might object that surely the *magician* is pretending to do the impossible, and so, making-believe. (Walton himself defines pretense in terms of make-believe (1990: 220).) Quite so. However, that the *magician* makes-believe does *not* mean the he or she invites the *audience* to do so. On the contrary, the whole point of magic is that *what is fiction for the magician should be illusion for the audience*. (For the contrast between fiction and illusion, see Walton’s discussion of Kasimir Malevich’s *Suprematist Painting* (1990: 54–57).)

¹² In Stephen Grimm’s helpful terms, a magic performance must be sensitive to the audience’s “proto-understanding”—its “convictions *about* the sorts of possibilities that are live or relevant, relative to the situation in question” (2008: 491). Grimm describes proto-understanding “as a further specification of Nozick’s notion of a ‘network of possibility’; ... something like a person’s ‘modal sense’ of the various alternatives that might have obtained, relative to the fact in question” (2008: 491; see Nozick 1981: 12).

¹³ Compare someone who responds to a piece of fiction or game of make-believe by saying, “Oh come on, bears can’t really talk”—they don’t get how fiction/make-believe works.

¹⁴ On the affective dimension, see my “The Enjoyment of Magic” (in progress).

¹⁵ “It’s become fashionable among those few magicians who even bother to discuss showmanship to talk about getting audiences to ‘willingly suspend their disbelief’” (Ortiz 2011: 25). The popularity of this view is due in part to Henning Nelms, whose *Magic and Showmanship: A Handbook for Conjurers* (1969) is widely cited by magicians and explicitly assimilates magic performance to theatrical fiction requiring suspension of disbelief. (For another example of resistance to Nelms’ view, see Sankey (2003: 89–90).)

¹⁶ This stunning phrase provides occasion to comment on the glaring prevalence of white men in magic. Even today, non-white (especially black) or female magicians are difficult for audiences to accept. There are clearly strong implicit biases at work here. What During writes of the latter half of the 19th century remains true: “[E]nlightened conjurers were... associated, more or less subliminally, with occult or supernatural agency.... Magic [therefore] placed them in a position of power and knowledge; but because of its black and white color-coding, also associated them with the forces of darkness” (2002: 108). Contemporary audiences remain uncomfortable with women and non-white men presented in ways that elicit such associations; so, performers must find ways to comfort them. Thus, predictably, most female magicians embellish their performances with “sex appeal,” and black men standardly do “comedy magic.” For further discussion, see my *The Art of the Impossible* (in progress).

¹⁷ Charles Isherwood picks up on this in his *New York Times* review of *Nothing to Hide*:

Theater is often said to require the willing suspension of disbelief. Without stating as much, Mr. DelGaudio and Mr. Guimarães challenge you to bring all the disbelief you can muster to their show. And then, with an insouciant air of doing nothing too impressive, they proceed to detonate the armor of cynicism that the most jaded

New Yorker could assemble, as easily as if they were blowing those wisps of white flower off a young dandelion. (2013)

¹⁸ In other words, we should reject (H3) just as we should reject a belief-based reply to the “paradox of fiction,” which challenges us to explain how audiences could have genuine emotional responses to what they know to be fiction. The view that emotional responses to fiction are explained by a (temporary) belief in the reality of the depicted events is deeply implausible for the sorts of reasons discussed in Carroll (1990: 63-8). That said, I think that the possibility of understanding the experience of magic as involving a kind of temporary belief in its reality (and so, the corresponding cognitive dissonance as a kind of experience of contradiction) has considerably greater plausibility than a belief-based response to the paradox of fiction. Jamy Ian Swiss convinced me of this in conversation, and while I think the view is incorrect, I believe it deserves more serious consideration than I can give it here.

¹⁹ In speaking of “alief that *p*,” I am treating alief as a two-place relation between a subject and a representational content rather than, as Szabó Gendler recommends, a four-place relation between a subject and a “representational-affective-behavioral content” (2008: 645). However, in so doing, I am following her own “loose’ usage” (647). Nothing in my argument hangs on the difference.

²⁰ See “The Enjoyment of Magic” (in progress).

²¹ This use of the term ‘canceling’ apparently derives from Stephen Minch’s *Secrets of a ‘Puerto Rican Gambler’*, on the magic of Daryl Martinez. Minch writes:

Not far into this work you should be ready to observe the workings of the Second Rule of Darylism. He calls it ‘canceling’. The formula runs thus: “Each time you do something in a routine, try to figure out what possible method a spectator might surmise for its explanation. Then structure the next portion of the routine to knock over, or *cancel*, this possibility in the audience’s mind.” (1980: 11)

²² Compare Juan Tamariz’s closely-related discussion of “the method of false solutions” and “the magic way” (2014: 3–19). Discussion of Tamariz’s rich theory is beyond the scope of this article.

²³ At the time of this writing, video of Copperfield’s performance is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70U2yybKhKg>.

²⁴ Zagzebski (2012: esp. ch. 2) develops a theory on which rationality is the expression of a natural drive to maintain psychic harmony.

²⁵ Compare the Müller-Lyer illusion, which is “robust” in the sense that knowledge of the illusion does not prevent the lines from looking as though they are of different lengths, and so, from generating a persistent alief to that effect.

²⁶ Thus Simon Aronson’s oft-cited comment: “There is a world of difference between a spectator’s not knowing how something’s done versus his knowing that it can’t be done” (Aronson 1990: 171). See also Ortiz (2006: 32–33).

²⁷ On the nature of epistemic authority, see Zagzebski (2012).

²⁸ An anonymous referee suggests that the two notions of imagination here are quite different, and even that the experience of magic might not involve a failure of imagination at all, but merely a

failure to “figure out” how the trick is done. I am not convinced. First, I take it that our engagement with fiction often involves imagination in more than one sense, including both perception- and belief-like states. Second, I take it that when a magic spectator says, “I can’t imagine how that’s done,” this means something more than, “I don’t know how it’s done;” it actually expresses a failure to *imagine*—whether in perception- or belief-like manner—a possible method. (On varieties of imagination, see Currie and Ravenscroft (2003).)

²⁹ The most difficult audience is, naturally, a group of magicians, precisely because they are familiar with so *many* ways in which illusions can be produced. The flip-side of this is that learning how to perform magic makes the experience of magic hard to come by.

³⁰ For more on the idea that the experience of magic involves the “containment” of a negative experience, see my “The Enjoyment of Magic” (in progress).

³¹ All references to Plato’s dialogues are to the Hackett edition of his complete works (Plato 1997).

³² Still, there is good reason to think that Euthyphro himself fails to adopt the proper aporetic attitude. At the end of the dialogue, he abandons his conversation with Socrates because he is “in a hurry” (15e), presumably to get on with prosecuting his father for murder *because piety demands it* (4d5–5a2). That Euthyphro is apparently willing to proceed with the prosecution suggests that he does not take his aporetic experience seriously. Instead, like Socrates’s other “misologistic” interlocutors (for instance, Anytus in *Meno*), he seems willing to sacrifice virtue for what is practically expedient. (On “misology,” see *Phaedo* 89d.)

³³ For Plato and Socrates, maintaining the belief that there is a correct account of piety (or virtue, or justice,...) in the face of *aporia* is of paramount *ethical* importance (see, for instance, *Meno* 86b6–c2). Notably, there are many magicians (James Randi, *Penn & Teller*, and Jamy Ian Swiss, for instance) who feel the same way about the audience’s belief that what they are witnessing has an explanation, and so, is “merely” a trick. That the audience should preserve this belief is, for them, an ethical matter. It is also, for reasons I have discussed, an aesthetic one.

³⁴ Not that all wisdom is non-aporetic: Socrates’s “human wisdom,” which consists in his knowing only that he doesn’t know, is a form of sustained *aporia* (*Apology* 20d–23b). This, I think, is a good clue to the value of magic.

³⁵ See “The Enjoyment of Magic” (in progress).

³⁶ *Acknowledgements.* My thinking about magic owes a great deal to conversations with Tyler Erickson and Jamy Ian Swiss, both magnificent magicians and superb mentors in magic performance. For many more instructive and interesting comments and conversations than I can possibly do justice to in this short article, I am grateful to audiences at the University of West Florida, the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, the British Society of Aesthetics, the American Society for Aesthetics, the London Aesthetics Forum, and the University of Leeds, as well as to students in my 2014 “Varieties of Experience” seminar at Bucknell. I owe special thanks to Jerrold Levinson for his insightful and extremely helpful comments on my presentation at the ASA and to the anonymous members of the 2015 Fisher Prize committee for suggestions that markedly improved this article. I’ve also learned from discussions with my dear friend and fellow philosopher-magician, Brian Hood. Finally, I am especially grateful to my friend and colleague, Sheila Lintott, for first encouraging me to

write about magic philosophically and for providing invaluable moral and intellectual support along the way.