

# **Academic Magic: Performance and the Communication of Fundamental Ideas.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper advances the case for how performance magic can be used as a larger medium for communicating fundamental ideas and addressing enduring questions. The paper begins with a stylized definition of performance magic as having a role for 'disruption' and 'subversion' in terms of audience perception of reality as well as an audience's set of beliefs, predispositions, and 'lifeworlds'. The section also engages with performance magicians as well as luminaries from the occult and Western esoteric traditions to illustrate the disruptive function of magicians broadly understood. The second part provides an overview of mentalism and mystery entertainment as a sub-genre within performance magic that is highly amenable to a more academic frame and mode of delivery. The third part outlines how key principles and effects from this sub-genre of performance magic can be applied to two broad areas of academic concern: (1) epistemology and the human condition, and (2) larger political and philosophical questions of morality, justice, rights, agency, and the power of the state. The paper concludes with a short summary and implications for the future of performance magic that moves beyond mere entertainment.

## **KEYWORDS**

academic magic, mentalism, mind reading, epistemology, human rights, language, philosophy, morality, justice, disruption

‘Landman is an example of how the performance of “magic” has been transformed in the last decade...far removed from circus-style trickery of sawing women in half.’

*Prospect Magazine*, May 2012, p. 79

‘Magic is a body of knowledge that, for one reason or another, has not yet been fully investigated or confirmed by the other arts and sciences.’

Isaac Bonewits, *Real Magic* 1979, p. 33

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, magicians have primarily occupied an outsider position within society. Whether these are real magicians engaged in magical practices and rituals or performance magicians seeking to entertain public audiences (and these categories may not be mutually exclusive), the subject position of a magician is one of an outsider who ‘knows things’ and who can ‘do things’, which invite curiosity from audiences, general onlookers, acquaintances, family and friends. The work of magicians can also cause fear, suspicion, derision and ostracism, as well as allegations of and prosecutions for heresy. History is replete with examples of ‘scholar magicians’ who are those individuals engaged in deep philosophical research, reasoning, and writing along with a metaphysical and epistemological continuum that stretches from the purely rational to the deeply esoteric. Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494), for example developed a syncretic philosophy comprising ideas and insights from Platonism, Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, Hermeticism and Kabbalah (Szönyi, 2015). John Dee (1527-1608) studied magic, science and religion, including the development of the Mercator projection map of the world, astrological readings for Queen Elizabeth I, and a period of scrying and communing with angels (Woolley 2002; Parry 2015). Even Sir Isaac Newton, father of modern physics dedicated his latter years of study to alchemy and the existence of ether (White, 2010).

These are examples of scholars who were interested in science, philosophy, religion and magic, while street magicians, conjurors, cunning folk, and lesser known practitioners often combined pure deception with a magical worldview to offer entertainment as well as ‘healing’ and other services to local communities (Davies, 2007; Wilby, 2005). For this community there are blurred distinctions between deception and genuine commitment to a magical worldview, but each contained a strong element of performance. The publication of Reginald Scot’s (1584 [1989]) *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* was the first book to expose the use of deception to create magical effects aligned with witchcraft. While the book was published in part to protest the treatment of suspected witches, a practice that Scot believed was irrational, immoral, and un-Christian, today it is heralded as the first magic book among performance

magicians featuring for example in the internal decorations of the headquarters of The Magic Circle in London.

The advent of 'mentalism', a sub-genre of performance magic that combines the deceptive methods of conjurers and stage magicians with linguistic techniques and other forms of deception to produce the appearance of psychic phenomena, mind reading, and other forms of 'magic of the mind' provided a real opportunity for more 'lecture' style performances grounded in psychology, history, spiritualism, philosophy, and other subject areas (Corinda, 1968; Landman, 2013). Mentalists claim to possess certain psychic and mental powers, particular psychological techniques for 'knowing' people (body language, influence, etc.), or act as 'agents of empowerment' who provide a means for audience members to achieve inexplicable effects, outcomes and impact. Popular mentalists have included Joseph Dunninger, Alexander, Theodore Annemann, Maurice Fogel, Chan Canasta, David Berglas, Max Maven, Derren Brown, Richard Osterlind, and Luke Jermay, among others.

As a performance magician, I have modelled my persona as a 'scholar magician' in which I advocate a position of 'metaphysical plurality' and commit to nothing in terms of real explanation, disclaimer, or other means of drawing a separation between reality and performance. Rather, I seek to explore fundamental ideas drawn from science, philosophy, history, politics, art, and music through the medium of magic and mentalism to create a world of 'theatrical mentalism' or 'mystery entertainment'. I am the well-travelled polymath and a modern 'renaissance man' who asks his audience to step into a world of ideas and the 'shared community of human minds' (Tallis, 2011) evocative of the Jungian 'collective unconscious' and the mystical collection of the 'Akashic records'. For this world, all explanations are possible and none are claimed as superior; an idea very much influenced by Paul Feyerabend's (1975) *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*.

In this article, I draw on my own experiences of crafting myself as a scholar magician to advance the proposition that performance magic provides an incredibly flexible, adaptable, and compelling medium for communicating fundamental ideas of social concern. In combining the ideas of the 'the pledge', 'the turn', and 'the prestige' for structuring magical effects with the idea of 'increasing implausibility' (Hickok, 2002) across the duration of a stage performance, I have been able to create a series of thematic stage shows that are grounded in the exploration of a linked set of ideas and concerns that have hitherto been far removed from the world of magic. To advance this proposition, the article first discusses the role of magic as a disruptive and subversive force for modern audiences, and the role of the magician as

outsider. Second, it provides a brief overview of mentalism and mystery entertainment as a sub-genre within performance magic that is highly amenable to a more academic frame and mode of delivery. Third, it outlines how key principles and effects from this sub-genre of performance magic can be applied to two broad areas of academic concern: (1) epistemology and the human condition, and (2) larger political and philosophical questions of morality, justice, rights, agency, and the power of the state. The article concludes with a short summary and implications for the future of performance magic that moves beyond mere entertainment, or in the words of one my audience members, magic that 'educates, entertains, and baffles, all at the same time'.

### **DISRUPTION AND SUBVERSION**

Magic can function as a significant means to disrupt and subvert an audience's sense of reality, and in some cases, their fundamental set of beliefs about how the world 'works', as well as deeper religious and metaphysical concerns. At a performance at the Regent Theatre in Ipswich in East Anglia from UK mentalist Derren Brown, I overheard audience members discussing his final mind reading act in his show where he had his eyes blindfolded and head wrapped with a large turban, but nevertheless was able to discern and provide answers to questions sealed in envelopes and held in a large glass bowl on stage. Despite overtly claiming that he had no psychic ability whatsoever, the audience members muttered on their way out 'I don't care what he said, he is the real deal'; suggesting that Derren Brown does in fact possess psychic power and really can read minds. Over two thousand audience members roared to their feet as he entered the stage, and thousands more have flocked to his shows intrigued by the possibility of mind control, mind reading, and hypnosis-based feats of manipulation.

Over the centuries, performance magicians like Derren Brown and hundreds of others have performed signature pieces that simply astound, baffle, and in many ways unsettle their audiences. There is the Robert Houdin's magical orange tree illusion in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Harry Houdini's vanishing elephant in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Maurice Fogel's death-defying bullet catch, David Berglas' blindfolded car drive, David Copperfield's flying illusion, and countless other stage illusions and public stunts that involve vanishes, transformations, penetrations, restorations, and objects or people appearing in impossible locations. These and other feats defy the laws of physics, challenge our sense of reality, and create moments of inexplicable astonishment that can leave an indelible mark for years to come. Despite the advance of science and technology, performance magic continues to provide enchantment for the general public, as well as leave open the possibility of unseen and unknown powers at work.

At a performance at Sneaton Castle in Whitby in Yorkshire, UK mentalist Luke Jermay astounded his audience with a wide range of demonstrations of mind reading using nothing more than the spoken word and everyday objects such as books, drawing pads, and index cards. In one demonstration he asked an audience member to recall her first kiss, where it happened, when it happened and with whom. The audience member stood and concentrated, while Jermay started to reveal details about the encounter. He described the scene as having the smell of the salt air, the sound of seagulls, and bright sunshine. It was 1972. The audience member gasped and started to cry. He went to her and offered comfort. While he had his arm around her, he gently kissed her forehead and declared, '...and his name was John.' The audience member confirmed that this was the case and sat down, while Jermay moved onto his next inexplicable demonstration.

Imagine being that audience member. She had come to an evening performance not knowing entirely what to expect. There were more than 70 people in the audience and yet she was singled out to assist Jermay. She had already witnessed a series of demonstrations that revealed the innermost thoughts of other audience members: childhood memories, school events, significant details from lives well lived. And then it was her turn. Remembering your first kiss is an emotional experience. It can evoke strong feelings and physiological reactions to recalling the event: a bittersweet moment, butterflies in the stomach, a rite of passage, a coming of age. As Jermay reveals the details of the encounter it is no surprise that the audience member had become emotional. Her tears were a function of memory, nostalgia, and perhaps even sadness over the time that had transpired since 1972, where life itself seemed much simpler then.<sup>1</sup> This example demonstrates the disruptive power of performance magic, where the explanation of how something is achieved is less important than the effect that it has on the public. The kiss itself changed her life forever, and three decades later, the mind reader's revelation of the kiss once again changed her life forever. Moreover, those who witnessed this demonstration also had their lives changed forever, particularly those for whom mind reading and psychic phenomena are either things that they had never witnessed or about which they have been highly sceptical. It is to the power of mentalism such as is evident from this example that our discussion now turns.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a common phenomenon in hypnosis sessions during which a participant or subject experiences age regression. The hypnotist is able to create a heightened state of relaxation during which a subject is asked to visualize a moment from his or her childhood. The contrast between the innocence and freedom of children and the complexities of life at the current age can produce a powerful emotional reaction, of the kind I witnessed Jermay produce in the audience member.

## THE MENTAL TURN

There are numerous analogous demonstrations to the one outlined above from Luke Jermy, where an audience loses its sense of reality, or questions the certainties and assumptions that govern their lives. The effect and impact that Jermy achieved that evening is borne of a very long tradition of mentalism that reaches back centuries. Mentalism emerged in the middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a popularised form of entertainment that drew on strands of spiritualism and stage magic. As magic became a respectable form of entertainment, moving from the street to the stage and performed by 'gentlemen magicians' (see Houstoun, 2014), mentalism and mind reading acts in general became more prevalent. The classic Victorian performance would combine a reference to the spirit world with Eastern and 'orientalist' (Said, 1978; Goto-Jones, 2016) influences of the famous 'Swami' who could read minds and answer burning questions from the audience. The magician would collect questions sealed in envelopes into a large glass bowl and then proceed blindfolded to provide answers to the questions and to correctly identify people in the audience who had asked them. Other feats included locating hidden objects in a theatre or even in a city in which the magician was performing by using the power of the mind alone (known as Hellstromism); moving objects with the mind (psychokinesis); predicting choices; receiving spirit messages on schoolroom slates; and providing 'readings' of people including constructing narratives about someone's past, present, and future using some sort of 'oracle', such as crystal balls, tarot cards, runes, tea leaves, palms, among other mystical objects.

This kind of 'magic of the mind' continued to develop throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now constitutes a thriving sub-genre of performance magic. Indeed, in the 2017 season of Britain's Got Talent, the act DNA is an exemplar of strong mentalism act, where the two performers appear to read minds and predict outcomes. Just as performance magic became less formal and stage-based to include the kind of 'street magic' made famous by US magician David Blaine, mentalism has evolved to include more informal performance styles using ordinary objects, stationery, and casual encounters in public spaces in which participants experience mind reading, demonstrations of body language, and personality or character readings. This kind of 'situational mentalism' is now hugely popular, where acts like Looch present themselves informally in small groups and carry out inexplicable demonstrations of influence, coincidence, and prediction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Looch also carried out an impactful prediction of a football match in which the predicted winner and score had been posted in advance to the local police and kept in the police safe until the day of the match. See <http://looch.co.uk>

Celebrated mentalists Chan Canasta and David Berglas were early pioneers of making mentalism appeal to the masses and brought its performance to large television audiences. *The Mind and Magic of David Berglas* was a hugely popular television show in the 1980s, while he started performing in 1949. Both were complete gentlemen with smart suits, pocket handkerchiefs, and well-spoken patter and presentation. In the late 1990s, Derren Brown recaptured and modernised this form of mentalism for mass audiences on television and then theatres across the United Kingdom. His style was younger, less formal, and more modern, though he did emulate performers of the past in some shows with full formal coat and tails attire. He galvanised his live and television audiences and led to a revolution in performance magic across Europe, the UK, and the US.

For me, the style of performance appeals to me greatly, since it is a combination of a lecture on some psychic phenomenon and then a demonstration of it using a member of the audience. Derren Brown initially focussed on psychology or 'psychological illusion' and thought manipulation, but then then gave way to more spiritualist themes and scientific scepticism levelled at fraudulent mediums, reminiscent of Harry Houdini's attack on spiritualists in early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (see, e.g. Houdini, 1924; Kalush and Sloman, 2007). His live and televised shows, however, showed me that this kind of performance provided the avenue for me to combine my academic interests with magical skills, drawing on my authentic training and career as a professor of political science and using mentalism to communicate ideas, concepts, and arguments that should have resonance with and give meaning to the general public.

This 'mental turn' in performance magic thus provided for me a background framework for my own style of performance. I embraced the 'gentleman magician' and combined it with a lecturing style that has drawn both on actual and fictional academics that have had a profound influence on me. First, I dress in trousers, shirt, tie, and blazer just as I do as a professor teaching my various courses. Second, through my formative years as an academic, I have been heavily influenced by real and fictional academics who have provided important sources for modelling my own approach to lecturing, performance, and audience interaction. Professors Jack Reece, Jeffery B. Morris, and Youssef Cohen at the University of Pennsylvania, Professor Theodore Moran at Georgetown University, and Professor Walter Stone at the University of Colorado all in their own way taught me how to have impact with an audience through humour, emotion, Socratic dialogue, and high levels of interactivity with students. These influences have been complemented by Robin Williams' performance in *The Dead Poet's Society*, Tom Hanks performance in *The Da Vinci Code*, and John Houseman's performance in the legal drama *The Paper Chase*. Across these three people I have learned the drama of lecturing with passion

and the ways in which to inspire audiences. These influences have been complemented and strengthened by my ability to remember names of audience members throughout a stage performance; a talent that is frequently not only noted by many in their feedback, but also as a crucial mechanism for establishing ownership, rapport and participation in a performance setting. By 'walking amongst' my audience and remembering names, I am able to give them some ownership over what is happening, engage them in creating the mystery, and include them beyond what is typically experienced in a live performance.

### **MAGIC AS A MEDIUM FOR COMMUNICATION**

In the seminal film, *The Prestige*, the character played by Michael Caine opens the film with a description of the structure of a high-quality magic trick. It begins with the pledge, which for me is the proposition of a demonstration. It introduces the concept, any materials that might be needed for the demonstration, and a foreshadowing of what might be about to happen. In the film, it is a canary in a small metal cage. Once the pledge has been made, the turn proposes something inexplicable or implausible that will be attempted. It raises expectations for what is about to occur, and is in many ways a challenge to the audience. In the film, the magician claims that the bird and the cage will vanish instantaneously. Finally, the prestige concludes the demonstrations in way that is completely unexpected by the audience. In the film, the canary returns unharmed.

The structure of a magic demonstration is analogous to storytelling and narrative structures from stand-up comedy to intense drama. In many ways, magic effects mimic Joseph Campbell's (1949) idea of the 'hero's journey' in which the magician dares us to watch something inexplicable, potentially fail, and then triumph in a dramatic fashion. In a corporate leadership event for a large UK utilities company, I was talking to a member of staff after my performance and he said 'I hate watching you perform.' Taken aback somewhat, I asked him what he meant exactly. He then said, 'You stand up there, presenting things, back stories, concepts, and big ideas; and you are a professor, and yet you have a high probability of failing, which makes for very uncomfortable viewing.' I smiled and thought what an interesting insight to how audiences might feel while watching a magical performance.

In following Campbell (1949), many magicians lead themselves and their audiences into the abyss, and then through some form of transformation, return triumphant. For example, in the famous Chinese Water Torture illusion, Harry Houdini has his ankles locked into wooden stocks and then is lowered into a glass container full of water. The audience witnesses his submersion and the locking of the tank, and then the curtains are drawn. Minutes pass as the



audience agonises over the fate of Houdini, who emerges haggard, wet, but triumphant to a thunderous applause. Magicians, mentalists, and bizarre magicians structure their material as a narrative, whether it is a silent manipulation of cards, a large stage illusion, close up demonstration, or a dark tale of intrigue that invokes a darker side of the unexplained world.

I have sought to structure my demonstrations in similar fashion, as I shall set out below; however, I also think very carefully about how I structure an entire show. I want a strong narrative line running through the show that explores and advances a particular concept or theme. Over the years these themes have included enchantment, John Rawls 'the veil of ignorance,' Arthur Conan Doyle's 'edge of the unknown', and the idea of 'subversion' across the worlds of politics, magic and jazz. I do not only think of the pledge, turn, and prestige for each demonstration, but across the different parts of the show such that I use US mentalist Chuck Hickok's idea of 'increasing implausibility' as the show progresses and create a final prestige for the show that returns the audience to the pledge set out at its beginning. The audience thus sees a show that makes a main claim about a significant idea or concept, which is then explored through increasingly impossible and implausible demonstrations and which then concludes with a final revelation that shows I have known all along what people would do, say, and choose.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION**

Having taught university students at all levels for over twenty years in the social sciences, I have become drawn to key concepts and ideas from philosophy, history, politics, sociology, science, mathematics, economics, and other subject areas. In my show 'the veil of ignorance' I began with asking the audience 'How do we know what we know?' Is it through observation alone (empiricism), faith (theology), or reason (philosophy)? This is a classic question of epistemology and the different ways of knowing the world. My answer in performance terms to this question is one of metaphysical plurality in which all explanations are perfectly plausible and acceptable. These can range from the purely rational to the deeply esoteric. This continuum of different 'knowledges' that are possible about the world precludes the need for any dramatic disclaimer about psychic ability often seen used by other performance magicians and instead allows me total freedom in supplying explanations and accounts of what my audiences have just witnessed.

The first question is then followed by my second: 'How do I know what you know?' Here, I am suggesting that I can and do know what people are thinking. As they are at a magic show, they are willing to suspend disbelief enough to entertain the idea that mind reading or knowing what other people are thinking might just be possible. My plausible explanation for this phenomenon

draws on an idea from neuro-scientist Raymond Tallis (2011) who argues that we are part of the 'shared community of human minds'. That line resonates well, and suggests that if we are all part of a shared community of minds, then perhaps we could access each other's minds in some way. It also resonates with Carl Jung's idea of the 'collective unconscious' in which key ideas are manifested and represented by symbols and 'archetypes' that can transcend the minds of individuals.

My third question is then: 'What do we know that actually matters?' This third question brings us back to the importance of thought and ideas and draws on the seminal work of philosopher Derek Parfit (2011) *On What Matters*. Some things really do matter, while other things do not. I poke fun at the jetsam and flotsam of daily life, the ephemera of the modern world, modern technology, social media, etc. and then ask the audience to think about the things that really matter to them. As we move from how we know what we know to how I know what they know to what we know that matters, I have set the scene and provided a framework for a magical performance in which people will experience mind reading and other psychic phenomena that address some of life's big questions.

In seeking to address questions of epistemology and the human condition, I have designed and performed a number of effects that borrow well-known methods from the world of performance magic. An opening effect that I have often used involves a simple book entitled *A Collection of World Famous Philosophers*. I allow an audience member to pick a page from the book and concentrate on that page. Each page has the name of a philosopher, the dates during which he lived, and three of his main ideas. The audience member studies the page and I begin to access their thoughts about the content of the page. I reveal snippets of information and then build toward a revelation of all the information, which happens to be the notion of mind and body dualism from Rene Descartes, captured by his famous phrase, *cogito ergo sum*, or 'I think, therefore I am'. As the revelation unfolds I cover his notion of hyperbolic doubt and then as a final prestige to the effect, I ask the audience member if they are aware of anything else associated with Descartes. They confirm that a pendulum is associated with him, after which I produce a small silver pendulum from a velvet bag that has been in full view of the audience throughout the performance of the effect.

A variant of this effect involves a stout pack of cards with the names of all the philosophers from the book on them. I leaf through the cards and discuss the philosophers, their big ideas, etc. I cut the stack into three piles and ask three individuals to each take a card, memorise the name and then seal the card in a small envelope. Once all three are sealed away, I begin to enter 'the shared

community of human minds' and reveal, one at a time, the philosopher that each person has in their mind. This is done through the use of a large drawing pad, where I engage in free-thinking and write down thoughts that come to my mind, while culminating in writing down the name of the philosopher. It can also involve pictures, doodles, and what appear to be nonsensical images, all of which are part of 'automatic writing' and stream of consciousness thinking.

Simon Singh's (1997) *Fermat's Last Theorem* is a wonderful tale of the permanence and even invisibility of mathematics. Fermat was a French mathematician who wrote a theorem about the Pythagorean relationship between the sides of a triangle. His theorem, he said, had been proven but that he did not have enough space in his notebook to write it all out. It took mathematicians another 350 years to finally prove that Fermat was correct. On reading this story, I was struck by the idea that maths exists in and of itself, independently from thought, just like a beautiful statue exists within each and every piece of marble. Years later I was reading Plato's *Timaeus* in which he posits that there is a physical world, a mental world, and a mathematical world. Like the story of Fermat, this idea of an independent mathematical world struck me as a great premise of a magical demonstration. I introduce Fermat and Plato and then discuss the origins of the famous 'magic square' or 'Lo Shu Square' discovered on the back of a tortoise in ancient China (see Figure 1).

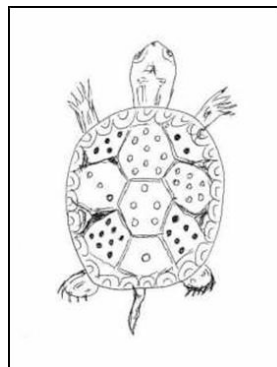


Figure 1. Lo Chu Square

The Lo Chu square involves an array of dots on the back of a turtle where the sum of any row or column equals 15, which can also be represented more abstractly (see Figure 2). This array of dots with symmetry and uniform summation has dominated much of esoteric and metaphysical thought, while occultists and magicians adopted variants of the Lo Chu square in their writings and rituals as seen, for example in the discussion of magic squares and their relationships to the planets in Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.

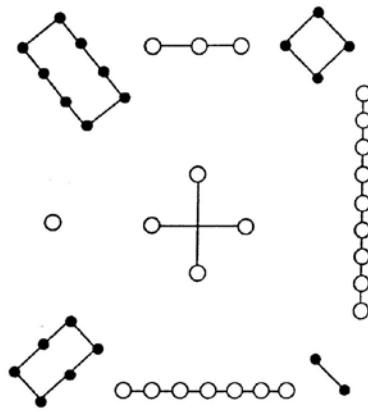


Figure 2. Lo Chu Square (abstract)

For me, the magic square and its history gave me a wonderful way to explore and demonstrate this idea of the permanence of mathematics, rooted in the ancient worlds of Greece and China, and illustrated through a live demonstration. I ask an audience member to think of a number and then produce a modern magic square whose rows, columns, corners, and four central cells add up to their chosen number (see Figure 3 for a square that adds up to 37).

<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>

Figure 3. Magic Square (total = 37)

My final example of effects that communicate ideas associated with epistemology and the human condition is one that uses the thought experiment from Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. The thought experiment involves an island of people, each of whom are given a box at birth

and told that inside is a beetle. They are told to look after their beetles for their entire lives under the strict condition that they never show the contents of their box to anyone else. The philosophical puzzle that this experiment raises is how does anyone actually know whether they have a beetle or not. Without ever looking in anyone else's box, no one could truly know whether what was in their box was in fact a beetle. Only by looking in each other's box could agreement be reached in what is a beetle. For Wittgenstein, the thought experiment demonstrates that language is a social activity and that the idea of a private language is not possible.

For me, the thought experiment is conceptually exciting and structurally perfect for a magic effect. I present four boxes to four members of the audience, each of whom is told that their box contains a beetle. Each person looks in his or her box and then confirms that they do in fact have a beetle. They do so without looking into anyone else's box, and the boxes themselves have been mixed freely before being handed out such that their order is unknown to me. I then 'divine' the contents of each box in similar fashion to the ways in which psychics would divine the identity and ownership of objects collected from the audience. As I move from person to person, I reveal that indeed each box does contain a beetle. The first box has an emerald beetle. The second box has a small model Volkswagen Beetle, the third box has a small picture of John Lennon, and the fourth box has a small card with the word 'Beetle' printed on it. The effect allows for an inexplicable divination of contents, a play on the word 'Beetle', and a learning point about the social attribute of language.<sup>3</sup>

## **POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

As a political scientist I have been drawn of course to key concepts and ideas from political and moral philosophy on the good life, happiness (or what Aristotle calls *eudemonia*), the power of the state, free will and human agency, and societal morality and justice. These fields are replete with wonderful examples that can be operationalized through performance magic.

### *The Ring of Gyges*

In Plato's *The Republic*, there is a thought experiment about morality called the Ring of Gyges that involves a tale of an earthquake that opened up a large crevasse in the desert in which a cave was discovered. Within the cave I a bronze horse in whose broken open stomach is a gold ring. A wonderer finds himself in the cave and take the ring. While he continues his journey through

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<sup>3</sup> I also do a variant of this effect using just one box, which appears empty and from which through successive sequences I produce the emerald beetle, the car, John Lennon, and the card. These objects are then all returned to the box and simply vanish with me concluding that 'In the end, language is merely in our minds.'

the desert he discovers that he becomes invisible every time he wears the ring. For the thought experiment, Plato is concerned whether when one is invisible would he or she be tempted to engage in 'unjust acts' such as theft or adultery.

For me, the Ring of Gyges presents a classic example of choice linked to morality, and I thus devised a routine that demonstrates mind reading and mentalism, which at the same time educating the audience about the larger idea of morality. I introduce the demonstration with a copy of *The Republic*, which is leafed through as I recount the tale. On my table is a small locked box from which I produce a gold ring. An audience member (or series of audience members) is (are) asked to either leave the ring in the box, or take it from the box while my back is turned. Whichever choice they make, I always know if they had or had not been tempted by the ring. In a later version, I then use the choices of the ring over several iterations to construct an ideal city state, where my audience member chooses between a king or premier, court or senate, and divine law or legal-rational justice. The end result is a new republic constructed from these choices, while my prestige moment comes with a revelation that I had a sealed prediction in full view the whole time with each of these choices foretold.

#### *The Veil of Ignorance*

In the Veil of Ignorance I explore the reasoning within John Rawls (1971) seminal work *The Theory of Justice*. In this book, Rawls asks us to imagine a state in which we were all behind the veil of ignorance, which is to say, a state where we did not know our age, gender, class, income, sexual orientation, race, etc. but that we had to decide on principles of justice from which a just society could be created and maintained. This idea of the veil of ignorance can also be found in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, who was ultimately concerned about the least well off in society. In my demonstration, I show a slide with a quote (with modern edits) from Gandhi (1958: 65):

'Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her].

Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny?

In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melt away.'

I then introduce the argument about the veil of ignorance from Rawls by asking the audience to imagine themselves as being behind the veil, not knowing a thing about themselves. In order to make the demonstration a bit more concrete I introduce choices that a country might make about tax policy. Yes, it seems odd to introduce tax policy in a magic show, but the presentation is engaging and involves everyone in the audience having a say. I show a slide with possible tax regimes:

- (A) No tax: all services are privately provided through market mechanisms.
- (B) Flat tax: everyone pays the same % rate regardless of income.
- (C) Regressive tax: highest % rate for middle incomes
- (D) Progressive tax: higher % rates for higher incomes.
- (E) Class Warfare: Only the very wealthy pay tax.

With some clever byplay about modern politicians, political parties, and the different options for tax regimes, I ask by show of hands who supports which policy. This in turn allows for more dialogue and challenge around who thinks which tax regime is best and why. I then introduce five black cards with each policy on it and five black envelopes into which the policies are sealed. These are then mixed with my back turned to simulate being behind the veil of ignorance. I then ask my audience helper to eliminate four of the envelopes to simulate her being behind the veil of ignorance. I ask the audience which of the five regimes most closely aligns with Rawls notion of justice. The audience agrees that it is regime D (progressive tax). Each of the eliminated envelopes is then opened to reveal that regimes A, B, C, and E have all been discarded. Each card is turned over to show a blank back. The fifth envelope is opened to reveal D (progressive tax) and when the card is turned over, the back has 'Rawls' printed on it.

### *Foundations*

It is typical for the scholarly writings on human rights to argue that there are no agreed philosophical foundations for them. Rather, philosophers have made appeals variously to god, nature, and reason (see Ingram, 1995; Landman, 2005), or have focussed on how they have been social constructed, or 'sacralised' (Hopgood, 2014; Reinbold, 2016) through iteration and diffusion by governmental and non-governmental organisations at the domestic and international level. Introduce the topic of human rights in my shows as being under threat in our current political climate and then challenge the audience to

think carefully about them. I explain that the absence of agreed philosophical foundations renders human rights precarious and then proceed to explain three main defences of the existence of human rights and two major critiques. On five form boards I have images main claims of philosophers in support and in opposition to human rights, including Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham and Karl Marx (see Table 1). Three audience members come on stage to select one philosopher and seal their choice in a large opaque envelope. A fourth audience member facilitates and then turns the remaining board face down, all of which takes place when my back is turned. I then approach each spectator, explain that the ideas on the boards are so powerful that they transcend the space between our minds. I correctly divine the three choices accurately.

Table 1. Foundations for and opposition to human rights

Philosopher	Idea	For or Against
Aquinas	God	For
Locke	Nature	For
Kant	Reason	For
Bentham	Nonsense	Against
Marx	Bourgeois invention	Against

### *Free Will*

A foundational assumption of much modern political discussion is that individuals have free will. Indeed, in the human rights example above, there are those who argue that human rights protect us in ways that allow us to exercise our agency, or free will. But the notion of free will is contested. Popular philosopher Sam Harris (2012) published a short essay on free will in which he concluded that we in fact do not have free will and that it is an illusion.<sup>4</sup> Contestation over free will has a much longer history and I thought it would make a great demonstration if I used three books from three different philosophers who have written about free will. The philosophers I chose come from the determinists (no free will), the ‘compatibilists’ (we have and do not have free will), and the free will advocates.

I introduce Karl Marx in general and then using a copy of the *Oxford Very Short Introduction to Karl Marx*, I recite his famous quotation from the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:

‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under

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<sup>4</sup> For a short version of his argument, please see <https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/the-illusion-of-free-will>.



circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'

I argue that Marx is primarily a determinist in that economic structures constrain our agency in ways that mean we have very little ability to exercise free will. I then pick up a similar book on David Hume and recite his famous quotation on free will:

'Liberty and necessity both operate within us, where causes outside us determine some actions and causes inside us determine other actions.'

This quotation shows us that we can have free will and not have free will depending on different contexts and circumstances. My final philosopher is Baruch Spinoza, who as we can see from the following quotation believes that we do not have free will:

'When men say that this or that physical action has its own origin in the mind...they are using words without meaning.'

The three books are then secured in three black raw silk drawstring bags and mixed while my back is turned and then mixed again while my participant has his back turned. I give the participant free choice in selecting one bag for me, one bag to be discarded and one bag to be kept by him. Whatever choices he makes, the prediction, which has been in plain view and sealed in an envelope, proves to be absolutely correct, suggesting that we in fact have no free will whatsoever.

### *Leviathan*

My final example is my demonstration using Thomas Hobbes seminal tome *The Leviathan*; a great work that is grounded in a rational and instrumental view of human nature that asks us to guard against the worst forms of our own behaviour by sacrificing some of our liberty to the state (or leviathan), which in turn provides law, order, and protection. Hobbes was motivated to write *The Leviathan* by the mass violence of the English Civil War and argued that in his conceptual notion of the 'state of nature' humans are in a constant state of war. I introduce Hobbes and recite from the *Leviathan* his famous line: 'The life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.' I recount the influence of the civil war and then show the audience my much-loved copy of *The Leviathan*. It is dog eared and faded, but it also has an additional feature: on each of its six sides are written the words 'solitary,' 'poor,' 'nasty,' 'brutish,' 'short,' and 'war'. I select an audience member to join me on stage and to hold the book in such a way that they can focus on concentrate on one of the six words. Standing

on the other side of the stage with my back to the audience member, I am able to divine the correct word; a demonstration that is then repeated several times.

## **CONCLUSION**

Magic is powerful. It can create strong emotional responses that can be experienced before, during and after a performance. Magic has a narrative structure that should lead an audience, raise their excitement and expectations, and then surprise them with something truly astonishing and inexplicable. Magic is thus a perfect medium for communicating fundamental ideas and probing fundamental questions. Through this article I have sought to show how magic can be used for communicating big ideas, how the magician can use his or her 'outside' status to disrupt and unsettle an audience, and how magic can create a learning moment for an audience that they are unlikely to forget for some time. I showed how the mental turn in performance magic can be combined effectively with an academic framing to deliver meaningful and informative performances. The examples provided here offer some insight into that value that magical performance can give to human contemplation of fundamental questions, challenges and ideas. The last ten years have been a period of creation, experimentation, and delivery of performances crafted to address key concerns in modern society. Magic is an art form, and as such, it should offer a critical and reflective commentary on the modern self and the contexts in which we find ourselves. In this way, my magical agenda is infinite and everlasting, since the questions I seek to address through performance are enduring and fundamental, while the variety of magical methods and effects are endless.

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