

University of Groningen

Magie en rede

Oosten, Jacob Jasper

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1983

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Oosten, J. J. (1983). *Magie en rede: Een onderzoek naar de invloed van magische denkwijzen binnen onze op het verstand georiënteerde cultuur*. Koninklijke Van Gorcum.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

SUMMARY

This dissertation is intended as a contribution to philosophical anthropology, and aims at coming to a better understanding of the limits set to reason in determining human thought and action. Particular emphasis is placed on the way in which magical elements continue to exert a determining influence upon thought and action, even when at first sight such thought or action appears to be extremely rational.

In western philosophy the concept of reason has been given a central place, at least since Heraclitus. When after the Middle Ages the influence of the Christian religion upon the way the world was conceived of began to decline and the sciences developed more and more, trust in man's rational abilities increased. Modern man likes to consider himself different from those less intellectually developed in more primitive cultures: he sees himself as no longer given to magical thinking, but as having learned to think rationally. Typical of rational thinking is setting to work after due consideration on the basis of well-grounded knowledge of the world one lives in. Magical thinking, on the contrary, is regarded as an attempt to exercise power over the world on the basis of ill-founded knowledge and superstition that can easily be disproved by a critical analysis.

Man lives by the grace of the order he finds in the world. In science he tries to describe this order as exactly as possible, so that he may be able to make his actions accord more effectively with reality. Science describes reality as a systematically ordered world, a cosmos.

The philosophers of existentialism have shown that man can never finally overcome the fear of nothingness and the threat of experiencing the purposelessness of his existence, so that he always remains vaguely aware that the cosmos he lives in includes the possibility of falling into chaos. Modern man shares this feeling with those of his fellow-men who are still living at a much lower level of intellectual knowledge. These employ magic to try and conjure chaos and keep it at a distance.

The central thesis of the present dissertation is, that in essence modern man does not behave otherwise. He prides himself upon the

knowledge he has acquired and does not like to admit to himself how relative a thing that is. This tempts him into looking upon his knowledge and the insights he has gained as absolute, which is expressed by the hypostatization of concepts and the relations between them. Thus he represses or camouflages his uncertainty and often hides it behind a seeming rationality.

In a little book, *The Emotions – Outline of a Theory*, Sartre has shown that emotions contain an essential magical component, because they contribute in irrational fashion to ordering an experiential world whose order has in some way been disturbed. When one observes what a part emotions also play in the life of rational modern persons, one can trace out the influence also exercised by hidden magical modes of thought upon our so-rational-seeming modern western culture.

The book consists of seven chapters; in the first three the starting-points of the disquisition are developed, in the other four chapters these are applied in various fields.

In chapter 1 Wittgenstein's theory of language-games is set forth. This theory is very suitable for distinguishing different ways of speaking about the world, as they may be seen, for example, in science, religion and art, and also for stressing the relativity of each of these ways. No description of reality can claim absolute validity, and the hypostatizing of important concepts from certain language-games must be avoided.

In chapter 2 the conception of humanity developed by the philosophers of existentialism is depicted: man is a being always in fundamental uncertainty as to his own future and the meaning of his existence, a being who tries in vain to escape from this uncertainty by opting for a particular project. Although this uncertainty does not usually show itself, it is one of the chief motivations of human thought and actions.

In chapter 3 man's need to live in an ordered world is stressed. Both in religious tales of creation and in the philosophical theory of knowledge we see again and again how from an original chaos an ordered cosmos rises up in which man can feel at home and find orientation. The fundamental uncertainty and dread the philosophers of existentialism speak of, mean nothing else but the fear of chaos continually threatening the cosmos so carefully built up. Chaos can only be warded off by trusting in a certain order expressed in a particular language-game. Modern man then proves to think in just as magical a way as so-called primitive man, if the definition of magic given in this chapter is used. The following chapters describe how the inclination towards

magical thinking manifests itself in various fields.

In chapter 4 it is shown how strongly thinking in terms of good and evil is dominated by magical modes of thought. The need for a surveyable, ordered society and the fear of disorder lead to emotionally determined standpoints, in which magical modes of thought have at least as great a part as rational patterns of thought.

In chapter 5 a short synopsis is given showing how the concept of „reason” forms a central theme of western philosophy from the very beginning. Yet the content of this concept is by no means clear yet. Few people are thereby prevented from believing in it. Belief in reason is typical of our culture. The concept of reason is only too easily hypostatized and thus used magically. In philosophy and science magical thinking would seem to be banned, but in actual fact this is not the case.

In chapter 6 the absolutizing of religious language-games is discussed, which leads directly to magical thinking. In various respects religion may be compared with art rather than with science, especially where its pretensions to truth are concerned. Religion may not, however, simply be condemned as magical and irrational. It deserves a place of its own beside art and science.

In chapter 7 it is shown how magical thinking influences social reality and the way the latter is regarded and thought about. It may be recognized in the adoration of „great men”, the belief in ideologies and the faith in rituals designed to ensure the favourable progress and outcome of affairs in all possible spheres. Social reality proves to be thoroughly imbued with magical modes of thought that only too often, in agreement with the ruling faith in reason, disguise themselves as purely rational processes of thought.