CHAPTER 1

Magic: What Is It and How Does It Work?

The two questions in the chapter title above are perhaps the most common ones asked by students of the history of magic. They are also arguably the two most difficult questions to answer, although I would venture to suggest that the first is easier to answer than the second. This is the case because in any given culture at any given time there is often a loose, notional consensus about what magic is, as well as who practices it. In the history of magic from Greek and Roman antiquity to the early Middle Ages, there were crucial shifts in the understanding of how magic worked, which ultimately resulted in the bifurcation of magic into a natural and demonic counterpart.[1] These were the only two available theories of magical operation from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, according to which magical properties were either inherent in natural objects, such as gems and plants, or magic was accomplished through the intercession of demons.[2] But these theories were formulated by Church Fathers and theologians, as well as the occasional late antique dabbler, who were largely outside the mainstream practice of magic. If one were in the position to query magical practitioners themselves about how their magic worked, on the evidence of Greek antiquity alone I doubt there would have been much consensus. In fact, I am certain that all but a few magical practitioners would have been dumbfounded by such a question. Such things were understood, and the written record with rare exceptions leaves virtually no trace of any discussion by magical practitioners themselves of how magic worked. What was discussed openly were the claims made by certain magical practitioners about what problems they were capable of solving. What was not open to question, and therefore prompted no discussion, was a world view in which magic, even if disproved in the case of a particular individual, remained possible.

To understand what magic is and how it worked in Greece therefore requires us to extend our inquiry beyond the ancient written and material record and to incorporate other models of behavior, derived principally from perhaps the most productive academic field in magic, anthropology, because the material record is insufficient in itself. It is important to recognize that our understanding of ancient magic begins, but does not end, with the close examination of texts and objects. Yet magic also incorporated ritual behavior, which is all too often not directly described for us. However, it would severely understate the fullness of a magical event if no attempt were made to situate a magical object in its performative context, or a plausible ritual context derived from comparative evidence. I propose to approach these problems in an unorthodox way. Rather than rehearsing every theory of magic available in antiquity and those offered by anthropologists, instead I want to emphasize those approaches that help us to understand magic in particular instances. Some general characterizations are inevitable. But simply put, there is no one way to understand all magic across all instances even for one culture at one historical moment. Magic is a busy intersection, to borrow from a classic anthropological statement about ritual, and as such there are always different religious, social, cultural, and performative routes that have to be pursued in explaining it. We shall have many opportunities in what follows to observe cross-currents of ancient culture converging in the practice of magic.

Before we can define ancient Greek magic, let us begin the discussion by assuming that one does not believe it exists or that is has ever existed. Why any person with a nasty fishbone stuck in his throat, possibly gasping for air, would believe that by virtue of saying a verse of poetry the bone would come out makes no sense. Why anyone would mold a figurine out of clay or wax and stick needles into its eyes, mouth, and breast – as a means to attract, but not permanently harm, a beloved – should, one would think, be consigned to the trash bin of superstition. Everyone curses and some curse with art, but why anyone would take the time to write out a curse formula invoking underworld deities on a thin sheet of lead, roll it up and pierce it with a nail, then bury it in the tomb of an unknown dead person reaches the height of absurdity. Illness, disease, and bodily injury from accidents are common enough features of life. But why someone would fashion an amulet from haematite or bronze, etch it with a rider on horseback spearing creatures like lions and scorpions or a prostrate demon, then wear this around his neck seems at best only indirectly to treat the ailment. It might be artfully crafted, but how could such an object possibly prevent harm? It takes no imagination to suppose that headaches were as frequent in antiquity as they are today, yet why someone would invest their time

acquiring a charm written on papyrus that quite literally commands the headache to leave, as if the headache could hear, defies rational explanation. All of these examples were easily recognized in antiquity as magic. Different explanations would certainly have been given as to whether any of these procedures was effective – indeed some would have been dismissed out of hand as superstition – and questions would have been asked about the ultimate purveyor of each magical aid. But there would have been general agreement that each procedure fell outside the realm of officially sanctioned cult activity, possibly had the taint of being illicit, and was certainly less than dignified, which were several criteria by which ancient commentators formulated a definition of magic. Yet if this was magic, one reasons, then something must have been gravely wrong, or the ancients let their imaginations run too freely. There seems to have been no understanding in the magical operation of how the world 'really' worked. Even the ancients had to have some rudimentary understanding of causality, we might suggest. After all, they built magnificent temples, ships, and weapons, and the Greeks in particular developed the early rudiments of science, mathematics, and medicine. How could magic coexist with these other domains of cultural achievement which would simply not have been possible if everyone thought magically?

Frazer and Tylor

One theoretical approach that has been advanced is to think that magic is false science, in the sense that a magical practitioner reasons wrongly from cause to effect. This view, which is attributed to Sir James George Frazer (1854–1938), allows us to introduce human error into the equation. Here magic is a vehicle cultures use to discover fundamental laws of cause and effect; magic 'works' only because the real relationship between causes and their effects has been distorted or misrecognized. Another approach derived from Sir Edward Tylor (1832–1917) and embraced by Frazer is to regard the connection a magical practitioner makes between an object he or she manipulates here, and the person over there who is the target of that operation, as based on a fallacious association of ideas. The clay image and the person it represents share outward similarities but have no actual relationship to one another in the real world. In this view, magic is an erroneous association of ideas based on analogy or, as Tylor famously put it, a mistaking of "ideal connexions for real connexions." Moreover, in order for there to be an actual, tangential relationship between a magical object or action and its target, there would have to exist some medium through which the effects on the object here

could be transferred to the person over there. A third approach regards practitioners of magic as a whole as delusional – assuming they are not outright charlatans – since they apparently believe that they exercise some control over the behavior of others when in fact they do not. Magic exists, according to this view, because everyone believes it exists. Powerful support for this approach can already be found in antiquity among such authors as Plato (*Laws* 933a–b), who was on the whole not particularly interested in magic. These are just a few of many approaches, outside of the specifically medieval explanations mentioned earlier, that have been offered since antiquity to explain magic, and each offers a valid perspective. While they allow us to say that magic "exists," in the sense that people do magical things, nevertheless they prevent us from concluding that there is any real effect behind it. Accordingly, none of these views allows magic to "exist" in the sense that it has any impact upon the world.

One alternative then is to conclude that magic is fundamentally a psychological phenomenon, whether collective or individual. There are many strands to this approach; however, its basic premise is that magical operations satisfy the practitioner's need to accomplish something practical in the face of otherwise insuperable or uncertain events. Illness presents a good example here. A family member has been struck with a debilitating illness for some inexplicable reason, by which I mean the available avenues of explanation have either been found wanting or are unknown. A magical operation performed on behalf of the ailing family member may not be thought directly to resolve the problem, but it allows those involved to feel as if some action has been taken. Magical action is practical action, and however misguided it may be, it nonetheless gives concrete expression to the concern of the family members involved in caring for their ailing relative. Note, however, that in viewing magic this way, we have not asked whose psychology underlies the perceived magical efficacy. It seems that both collective and individual psychology are at work here: society governs the conventions and expectations of magic, and individuals respond to and operate within those conventions. But the problem grows more difficult when we try to isolate exactly what an "individual" response is in this context. What we may take to be an "individual" emotional response – for example, mere satisfaction or relief on the part of the sick person that a healing amulet has been made and placed around his or her neck – at bottom has already been "collectively" defined by the society that takes the efficacy of such healing amulets for granted. It seems that we cannot escape the way in which individual responses reflect collective representations.

Malinowski

Other psychological approaches to magic have more effectively made that break or, rather, emphasized the "individual" quality of magic in terms of it being a means to an end, in contrast with religion as a collective organization that functions as an end in itself. In Bronislaw Malinowski's (1884–1942) famous essay, *Magic, Science, Religion and Other Essays* (1948), based on his research among the Trobriand islanders, he draws an important distinction between "sacred" activities like religion and magic, which partake of symbolic forms and behaviors, and "profane" or pragmatic activity like science and technological accomplishments. Thus in one sense Malinowski avoids the Frazerian puzzle of whether magic was actually science in its infancy because these two activities are separate for him. On the other hand, he understood that magic was practical activity that was simultaneously interwoven with symbolism, not to mention what he memorably called its "coefficient of weirdness." There is no simple way to disconnect the two, even if we recognize a continuum with pure technical activity at one end unencumbered by prohibitions and, at the other end, technical activity hedged round by a series of metaphysical concerns and given a ritual stage for its enactment. What is often taken to be Malinowski's most important contribution to the study of magic – that magic begins where technology is insufficient – has been easily refuted,[3] but what endures is his stress on the instrumental quality of magical activity and its anticipatory nature. As a means to an end, magical activity reaffirms the expectation of achievement and success in a given endeavor. It is psychologically satisfying to the individual participants for that reason. But that is not all. Malinowski also asserted that individual memory played a role in the perceived success of magic. Thus for every magical operation that "succeeded," this was remembered by the community more readily and vividly than those that did not.[4] Together the anticipation of success and its outsize memory cannot be overestimated as factors that help to reinforce magical behavior.

Magic as Communication

There is another, perhaps more personal, illustration of the problem of what magic is that does not directly involve any prevailing theory, which I present in the form of a thought experiment. Imagine that you are coming home after work or school, just as you typically would. It has been an ordinary day and nothing particularly unusual has happened. When you get

to your door, you find a small package sitting on the doorstep. You assume the package was delivered for you, so you open it and inside you find a bloody chicken heart with a nail stabbed through it. Sickening as that is, you realize the heart has been cut and inside the incision there is a sliver of paper, folded in half. You carefully pull the paper out, unfold it, and find it has your name written on it. Tucked in the paper's fold there are some fingernails and hair – *your* fingernails and hair.

Since you are not superstitious, or are but would never admit it, the rational side of your brain takes over. The whole thing, you say, is ridiculous – some stupid trick. Who would have done this? And then you start thinking: if it isn't a gag, does someone really hate me? Why didn't they just tell me they hated me rather than doing this? Even if it is a gag, what exactly are they trying to say? Did they think I would believe it or that it would have some effect on me? Did *they* think it would work, even if I don't? Who do I know that would believe in such nonsense, or go through such elaborate measures even as a joke? And where in the world did they get my fingernails and hair, let alone a bloody chicken heart?

This example, albeit contrived, is not meant to suggest that magic is "real" in the sense that its operation has a physical impact on the world. It is meant to suggest that magic is fundamentally a form of communication – and that communication, whatever shape it takes, can indeed impact the behavior of others. Note that this is not the same thing as saying that magic exists because everyone believes it exists. Rather, as in the example above, even if one does not believe in magic, one can nevertheless believe that a magical act was meant to convey a message. The weirdness of the action itself prompts a series of thoughts about what it might mean, and therein lies the rub. Even before deciding whether there is anything to magic, one is diverted into thinking about *who* might be behind it.[5] We can therefore separate the question of whether magic is real from the question of whether it can have an impact on others' behavior. Most critiques of magic in antiquity and even more recently miss this distinction entirely, focusing as they do on mechanical causal relationships in the magical operation itself that should be explicable in terms of observable natural laws, not invisible forces. But magic is always effective only within a social context whose network of relationships defines it and gives it meaning. Indeed, magic is quite unthinkable outside a social context. And it is within such a social context that we can say magic is "causal." If a magical act changes someone's behavior, then it has exerted a causal effect.

But we can be much more specific here, even without yet worrying about particular cultural milieux or historical forms of magic. Magical acts imply intention, which means that behind the individual act someone intends to convey a message. The message can be harmful or helpful,

depending on the circumstances, but the magical act itself registers and publicizes someone's desire.[6] Who is capable of publicizing their desires in this way and how exactly they do it will depend on the culture being examined. But the important point to take away is that such intentionality, realized as magic, is fully structured as a social phenomenon. If magic is an act of communication, then the parameters for who can communicate and how they do so will be defined by the society in question. To give a clear example, if I am a late Roman Greek and wish to compose a curse tablet calling upon a *nekydaimon* 'spirit of a dead man', I write that tablet in Greek, not in Latin or Syriac. I take for granted not only that the underworld spirit will understand Greek, but that it has any understanding at all. Since I am effectively using the spirit of a dead man as a go-between to harm my enemy – say a prosecutor I wish to strike silent as he testifies against me in an upcoming trial – then I am also assuming this spirit understands how to operate in my world. In this sense the dead man's spirit is indistinguishable from a living person. Thus the entire chain of magical communication, from its interlocutors to the medium of communication to the anticipated action itself, is constituted in manifold ways by social convention.

Lévy-Bruhl

In order to better grasp the significance of this point, and to accord the last example with modes of ancient Greek thinking, we need to come to terms with a fundamental anthropological notion set forth by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1959), who was originally trained as a moral philosopher. In contrast to the evolutionary trend of Victorian scholarship on non-Western societies – of the type, for example, typified by Frazer's model for the development of religion out of science, which in turn developed out of magic – Lévy-Bruhl instead argued that such societies were not "irrational," in the sense of misunderstanding the laws of cause and effect, but were organized according to their own coherent principles. Foremost among these was what he called the *law of participation*. In *How Natives Think* (*Les Fonctions*, 1910), Lévy-Bruhl writes that:[7]

> Primitive man, therefore, lives and acts in an environment of beings and objects, all of which, in addition to the properties that we recognize them to possess, are endued with mystic attributes. He perceives their objective reality mingled with another reality. He feels himself surrounded by an infinity of imperceptible entities, nearly always invisible to sight, and always redoubtable: ofttimes the souls of the dead are about him, and always he is encompassed by myriads of spirits of more or less defined personality.

There are two important strands to disentangle here. The first refers to the notion of living within two orders of reality. This is what Lévy-Bruhl means by "mystic," namely a belief in forces and influences that are invisible, and often imperceptible, but nevertheless real. Ancient magic operates within such a world, whereby the forces called upon, even when not explicitly defined by a personality, are invisible and imperceptible and can only be felt after they have taken effect. The implications of a mingled reality can be drawn out further, however, especially with regard to objects. Throughout the whole of Greek antiquity physical objects such as cult statues were treated as though they had human attributes: they were bathed and cleaned, dressed and worshipped, presented with food offerings and prayers, and were thought capable of movement. The counterparts of cult statues, figurines fashioned out of clay or wax, were treated with similar care and used in ancient magic. Lévy-Bruhl helps us to understand why statues and figurines were treated in this way, without resorting to a notion of irrationality defined (in our Western manner) by a failure to draw the proper dividing line between animate and inanimate objects. In Greece in particular, matter itself could have an ambiguous status. To give a specific example, for some highly educated thinkers such as the late seventh/early sixth-century BCE philosopher Thales of Miletus, stones that had magnetic properties were thought to contain souls (11 A 22 D-K = Arist. *de An.* 1.2.405a19–21). It is not hard to see how magnetic stones that attracted iron filings, in the absence of an available electromagnetic theory, could be thought to be animate – in other words to contain a soul. Reality as we know it in the mechanical, causal Western view, with its sharp dividing line between organic and inorganic matter, is collapsed in Thales' view of the magnet. Nor should it come as a surprise at this point to know that magnets also figured in various ways in ancient magic. As outsiders to cultures that think this way, it simply will not do to superimpose a rational/irrational distinction on their actions, as if by characterizing them this way we are implying that with further understanding of mechanical causality their magical behavior would change. Such a view neglects to observe that magic is "causal" within a social framework whose effects are real. The problem then is that an incomplete grasp of physical causes is embedded within a broader social framework for the understanding of cause – and the key is that the social framework is the more salient of the two.

Along these lines we can turn to the second dimension of Lévy-Bruhl's concept of participation, which is the notion that the mingled reality of the primitive world is peopled with divine beings, particularly spirits of the dead. The Greeks, as so many other cultures, took elaborate pains with burying their dead, largely as a way to ensure that the dead person's soul

rested peacefully. The Greeks harbored many different beliefs about dead souls, and scaled them in different ways, from heroes who rested at their leisure in the Elysium fields and the Isles of the Blessed, to an altogether different sort of underworld community whose anger was beyond human appeasement. It is this community that interests us in particular, and it comprised three sets of dead: those who died without funeral rites (*ataphoi*), those who died in an untimely or premature way (*aōroi*), and those who died violent deaths, such as, in later times, gladiators and other murdered victims (*biaiothanatoi*).[8] A practitioner of magic who wished to curse his adversary had to pay court to these angry denizens and address them with his request for aid, especially the *aōroi* and *biaiothanatoi*. The curse tablet itself was laid in their tombs, and sometimes in the skeletal hand of the deceased. For the moment, the crucial point to grasp is that the Greeks, as so many of the cultures under study by Lévy-Bruhl, inhabited an extended society in which the dead participated as much as the living. Lévy-Bruhl emphasizes the social dimension of this kind of world this way:[9]

> In short, without insisting on well-known facts, the primitive lives with his dead as he does with the living who surround him. They are members, and very important members, of a society with manifold participations, a social symbiosis in which the collective representations of his group give him his place.

It is quite natural for us to think of ourselves as members of a living community, with responsibilities and obligations to variously tiered groups and subgroups, and to define ourselves in different ways with respect to each of these groups. It is quite another thing entirely to include the dead among those with whom we interact *as if they were living presences*, moreover to regard our obligations to them as equally important as those to the living. When I speak of a social context for the practice of Greek magic, it is this more expansive community that must be borne in mind.

There are many examples from Greek literature that illustrate that the dead were a vital part of the living community. The plots of whole Greek dramas turn on that relationship, but it is not primarily the literary exploitation of the dead that interests us. Rather, we are interested in the received wisdom that certain of the dead are engaged in an ongoing scrutiny of the activity of the living, and more importantly that the angry dead continue to drive the living to distraction. Hesiod tells us, for example, in the *Works and Days* (109–26) that after the immortals brought the Golden Race of mortals into being and they had lived for a time, at death they were dispersed by Zeus throughout the world of mortal men as

invisible *daimones*. Thenceforth hidden in air and wandering the earth they became guardians of mortal men and, in some versions, were particularly drawn to the surveillance of cases at law and unjust deeds. Much later in the fourth century Plato tells us that souls of the angry dead are dragged back into the visible world and hover about tombs and graveyards (*Phaedo* 81c–d). Elsewhere he notes that those done to death by violence harbor a particular animus against their assailants (*Laws* 865d–e), and Xenophon adds that these souls track the wicked with avenging powers (*Cyropaideia* 8.7.18–19).

This invisible half of the social community is not comprised solely of the dead. It goes without saying that a fundamental feature of Greek religion is that the pantheon of Olympian divinities, not to mention the various shades of Olympian divinities that are localized and specific to certain city-states, as well as the "lesser" divinities that occupy certain demes or districts, cult and boundary sites, can make themselves felt to mortals, sometimes in particular and personalized ways. Greek literature from epic to tragedy and comedy, often an indispensable source for our understanding of Greek religion, is preoccupied with dramatizing such interactions, especially those involving the Olympian divinities. In day-to-day practice, however, the connection is rarely personalized to that degree, so that for instance a response from the Delphic oracle is literally, through the medium of the Pythia or priestess, the voice of Apollo. But Apollo's personality and individual proclivities, such as those discussed in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, are hardly that manifest in his actual responses. In magic there are several underworld divinities – Persephone, Hekate, Hermes, Selene in her magical aspect, as well as a plethora of anonymous *daimones* – to whom practitioners of magic can address themselves. There are certain prescribed conventions of address here, for instance a victim in a curse is said to be bound in the presence of these underworld figures who are in turn invoked by epithets that refer to their binding capacity. But beyond this there is nothing particularly distinctive about the personality of the divinity being addressed. Nonetheless it would be a mistake to regard these conventions of address as rhetorical only. Nor are these invisible entities any less significant for the fact that their personalities are less well defined. This is because personification, or anthropomorphism more generally, of invisible forces cannot be used by itself as a measure of how *felt* these invisible forces are to members of a given community. That can only be measured by the degree to which that community's behavior is governed or modified by them. Thus Lévy-Bruhl's concept of participation helps us to see how, in the particular Greek context, the souls of the dead, divinities, and mortals all partake of the

same reality, the same physical space and, in the case of magic, share responsibility as agents for the realization of someone's desired aim.

Evans-Pritchard

A landmark contribution to our understanding of how magic operates within a society was made by the justly famed British social anthropologist Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–73) in his study, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (1937). The impact of Evans-Pritchard's research has reached well beyond his field of social anthropology to the historical study of magic and witchcraft, both in antiquity and premodern Europe and beyond, however sometimes in ways that distorted the rather specific cultural findings he advanced. In brief, Evans-Pritchard demonstrated in thorough detail how among the Azande,[10] a people who live in central Africa along the Nile–Congo divide, magic, witchcraft, and oracles were "like three sides to a triangle."[11] By this he meant that the three practices were tightly interlocked, and depended on one another for mutual reinforcement. Witchcraft (*mangu*) for the Azande was in essence a psychic emanation from someone that could harm another person, and the Azande believed that witchcraft was localized as a material substance in the body that could be discovered by autopsy. Witchcraft could emanate from such a person without their knowledge or conscious effort. Magic (*ngua*), on the other hand, for the Azande involved techniques to achieve some purpose that incorporated medicines, spells, and rituals. Magic is always consciously undertaken. The Azande use oracles – of which the three most prominent in Zande society, with each progressing in prestige, were the termite,[12] rubbing-board,[13] and poison (*benge*)[14] oracles – to diagnose witchcraft in particular instances, which in turn sometimes demand magic as a remedy.

In a typical case of misfortune, let us say that a co-wife is suspected of cheating on her husband with another man, one or more oracles are consulted and a diagnosis of witchcraft is found. The witchcraft may be attributed to a different co-wife or a neighbor who is thought to harbor ill intentions toward the accused cheater, and the witchcraft is used to explain why the co-wife cheated. Sometimes the oracles are used mutually to confirm each other, with "lesser" oracles such as the termite oracle being confirmed by the rubbing-board, the rubbing-board is then confirmed by the poison oracle, and so forth. The diagnosis itself is always socially relevant because it points toward another member of the community as the agent responsible for the witchcraft. By diagnosing a

social origin for misfortune, this allows intervention and action to be taken that can determine future behavior. So for instance at this point in our example the accused co-wife may undertake magical remedies, such as drinking and spitting water to cool off the witchcraft inside her, to remove the witchcraft. What has really happened, however, is that a stage has been set to enact a change in social relations. If the suspect agrees to undertake a magical remedy for her witchcraft, she is in effect acknowledging publicly the harm she has done and at least ostensibly promising to do what she can to avoid it in the future. More dramatic shifts in social relations can happen as well, such as when a suspect steadfastly denies any responsibility and as a result relations with that suspect are severed. But by virtue of the fact that witchcraft was not consciously undertaken, and that rules under British law at the time prevented direct retribution from being taken against confessed witches, an individual's responsibility for injury was diffused in such a way so as to encourage admissions of guilt. In other words, if witchcraft was performed unconsciously, the sense of personal guilt was correspondingly lessened.

It is impossible to do justice to the care with which Evans-Pritchard examines the wealth of Zande witchcraft and magical practices in such a short order. However, it is not a detailed examination of Zande witchcraft or magic in particular that I want to pursue. Rather, in our effort still to come to terms with some key features of what anthropologists used to call a magical world view,[15] especially to think about the ways in which individuals who exhibit such a world view explained their beliefs both to themselves and to outsiders, Evans-Pritchard offers some insightful evidence about the Azande. Having inherited the concern since Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl about whether non-Western magical practices could be reconciled with a "rational," which is to say causally based, view of the world, Evans-Pritchard took great pains to examine exactly how the Azande justified witchcraft, oracles, and magic to themselves and to him. He showed for instance that if the Azande partially accounted for misfortune in terms of mystical (in the Lévy-Bruhl sense) relations, they were also quite aware of their own role in such misfortune, as well as of the usual haphazards of everyday life. Witchcraft was invoked not as a general explanation of misfortune, but rather to explain how on a particular occasion, all other things being equal, misfortune happened. The attribution of misfortune to witchcraft imposes a moral framework on events, because the social dimension of witchcraft enables such events to be given an actionable meaning. It is my contention that Greek magic was also located within such a framework by its practitioners, although one must grant due consideration for the substantial differences between Zande and ancient Greek society.

One of the most significant examples of a Zande explanation in this regard reported by Evans-Pritchard is the following:[16]

> I found it strange at first to live among Azande and listen to naïve explanations of misfortunes which, to our minds, have apparent causes, but after a while I learnt the idiom of their thought and applied notions of witchcraft as spontaneously as themselves in situations where the concept was relevant. A boy knocked his foot against a small stump of wood in the centre of a bush path, a frequent happening in Africa, and suffered pain and inconvenience in consequence. Owing to its position on his toe it was impossible to keep the cut free from dirt and it began to fester. He declared that witchcraft had made him knock his foot against the stump. I always argued with Azande and criticized their statements, and I did so on this occasion. I told the boy that he had knocked his foot against the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in the path, for it had grown there naturally. He agreed that witchcraft had nothing to do with the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in his path but added that he had kept his eyes open for stumps, as indeed every Zande does most carefully, and that if he had not been bewitched he would have seen the stump. As a conclusive argument for his view he remarked that all cuts do not take days to heal but, on the contrary, close quickly, for that is the nature of cuts. Why, then, had his sore festered and remained open if there were no witchcraft behind it?

In this account witchcraft is not invoked as a general explanation of misfortune. Instead, witchcraft explains how particular conditions came together, not contrary to but in conjunction with natural causes, to bring someone into relation with events such that they sustained injury. Hence it would be incorrect to suggest that because the Azande believe in witchcraft they do not have an understanding of natural causation. Witchcraft is one among several causes that explain an event, and its relevance derives both from the moral framework for responsibility to which it has reference and from its ability to account for deviations from an otherwise normal state of affairs that results in injury. To the extent that magic involves mystical or invisible powers, Zande explanations for magic are essentially the same as for witchcraft.[17] That there was a person who consciously undertook the magical rite, as distinct from the unconscious activity of witchcraft, goes without saying. But the feeling among the Azande that in both witchcraft and magic events are determined by invisible and visible action, and that explanations for situations of failure must thereby entail both natural and mystical causes, is about as close as an outside observer can come to a coherent account of their beliefs.

Finally, it is worth noting a rather important implication of Evans-Pritchard's attempts to engage the Azande about their witchcraft and magic beliefs. Part of the difficulty he encountered is that the typical Zande informant "actualizes these beliefs rather than intellectualizes them," and "their ideas are imprisoned in action and cannot be cited to explain and justify action."[18] These remarks tell a cautionary tale that reaches well beyond the anxiety that the classicist, as a student of ancient culture, has no direct access to living subjects like the anthropologist. Even granted that access, magic and witchcraft in both ancient and contemporary cultures are responses to misfortune and failure realized as action. Yet this action may only admit of reflection by the members of those cultures to a limited and, perhaps to our minds, unsatisfactory degree. Thus while we as observers attempt to understand how magical practices are constructed within a given society, and further to draw out the implications of those practices as far as they imply a set of premises for how the world works, we must be prepared to accept that our explanations might have seemed incomprehensible or even bizarre to the subjects under investigation. Were we actual members of that society, on the other hand, we may well not be interested in explaining magic at all.

Sympathetic Magic

Although we have already mentioned Frazer's position that magical activity rests on a mistaken relationship between real causes and their perceived effects – a view that indispensably relies on Edward Tylor – we have not yet confronted his most significant contribution to the study of magic. It is easy to exaggerate the importance of Frazer's insight into the nature of magical operation. But for more than a century anthropologists, classicists, and scholars in related disciplines have been unable to displace his fundamental notion of sympathetic magic, even if they have legitimately criticized and largely rendered effete the assumptions upon which it rests. In *The Golden Bough* (1890), a Herculean effort that eventually filled twelve volumes, Frazer sketched an overarching view of magical behavior that he called *sympathetic* and which branched in two directions: "first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed."[19] The former idea Frazer called *homeopathic* or imitative magic, since it was based on the association of ideas through similarity; the latter he called *contagious* magic, since it was based on the association of ideas through

contiguity. These two forms of magical thinking are ideal types, and Frazer correctly recognized that in practice they are often combined. So for example to fashion a figurine out of clay and pierce it with needles is homeopathic magic, if I expect my victim to suffer injury on his person at the points where I stick the needles. If I incorporate some of my victim's hair, nail parings, or a piece of his clothing into the figurine, I am using contagious magic. Because it is very common in many cultures to do both operations at the same time in fashioning a figurine, care must be taken in analyzing it in such a way that does justice to both sympathetic principles.

Both homeopathic and contagious magic imply a notion of sympathy than can be more closely analyzed. As an example, the magical operation that is performed often mimics the results desired. If I pierce a lead curse tablet and construe my act of piercing it as a binding action – in other words, piercing the tablet here means to transfix it – and I anticipate the transfer of such a binding action to the target of my curse – binding my victim in the sense of preventing him from speaking or acting – then I am acting sympathetically. This is essentially the idea behind homeopathic magic. However, the sympathetic relationship between my magical action and its intended effect implies that the effects must be transferred or communicated to my victim at a different point in space and a later point in time.[20] How this process is understood by magical practitioners varies from culture to culture. The Azande, for instance, attribute the transfer to what they call the *mbisimo* or 'soul' of magic and witchcraft.[21] This is a psychic property of persons and things that can invisibly transfer itself through space and time, and it is this property which in their view accounts for how magic or witchcraft can realize its effects at a distance in space and time. Contagious magic relies upon a related but different notion of sympathy. Effects are similarly transferred through space and time; however, in this case the magical operation itself is directed toward a victim's possessions or body parts. A Greek witch burns her victim's hair or clothing, for instance, as a way of transferring the fire of erotic emotion to him. Lévy-Bruhl understood contagious magic to imply his concept of participation, in the sense that there was a special connection between a person and his things:[22]

> The things that a man has used, the clothes he has worn, his weapons, ornaments, are part of him, *are* his very self, (construing the verb "to be" as "to participate"), just like his saliva, nail-parings, hair, excreta, although to a lesser extent. Something has been communicated to them by him which is, as it were, a continuance of his individuality, and in a mystic sense these objects are henceforward inseparable from him.

Magic and the Extended Person

More fundamentally the very existence of contagious magic implies an extended notion of 'personhood'. This is what anthropologists in other contexts have called the *distributed* or fractal person, which we can apply to magical practice in a narrower sense than that which they employ.[23] I use the term also to mean that a person's possessions or body parts can be distributed throughout his environment, and that in some sense these accoutrements and parts can be thought of as replicating him. Magic capitalizes upon the belief that acting on the distributed parts will still affect the whole (*pars pro toto*). The sympathetic relation guarantees that the part of the person being acted upon magically stands for the whole person and that this connection holds true at a distance in time and space. In some cultural contexts, the notion of personhood can be expanded much further. For instance, within medieval Catholic tradition, not merely reliquaries, containing the body parts, bones, teeth, and blood of saints, were thought to convey power, but also holy oil poured onto their tombs and kept afterwards in vials or even grave dirt extracted from around their tombs and kept in tiny parcels. In these latter instances, the saint's person is distributed throughout the material that comes into contact with his tomb or sanctuary, and conventions have been reached by the community in question as to how far the saint's personhood extends. In one instance, the painted eyes of Saint Peter on a fresco in a thirteenth-century Bulgarian church have been scratched out and saved, implying that the paint scrapings themselves can be thought of as extensions of Peter's person.[24] Moreover, we have numerous examples from other cultures of 'sacred geography' – another example of participation – which refers to the way in which a saint is identified with a village or his cult site. The extensions of his person in these instances may reach not only to the physical geography of his site, but also to the rituals performed in his honor, the dreams he conveys to those who incubate at his tomb, as well as to the whole array of communicative acts that take place between him and his devotees on their pilgrimages.[25]

It is also interesting to consider how a culture conceives of personhood as illustrated specifically in their magical behavior, which may or may not conform to other social or institutional forms of personhood. A different kind of distributed personhood can be found in fourth-century BCE Attic curse tablets. Many of these tablets single out in a stereotyped way the hands, feet, tongue, and soul of their intended victim for binding. This binding action is more broadly understood to cause a halt to the victim's activity, whether it be their day-to-day commercial activity

or whether it be to secure and hold their erotic interest after turning it away from another. In some fundamental way, then, the magic captures the essential person parts for its action to be complete. Sometimes the body parts that are targeted are relevant to the aim of the magic – as an example, the tongue and minds of prosecutors are bound by a worried defendant since these are the faculties most relevant to their profession – but at other times the same faculties are bound in a more general formula to restrain a business competitor.[26] In any case, to bind these parts is to bind the whole person. And while there is variation in the formula, which sometimes expands to include a person's breast, heart, and, rarely, genitalia, some person parts such as the ears and nose are left out entirely. It may be that all of these sensory functions are subsumed under the mention of the soul (*psychē*) in the tablets, but this is not clear. And yet every Greek had a more ample notion of personhood from daily experience, social, political, religious, and familial relations, childbirth, and so forth. Moreover, no Greek in daily life ever addressed his family or fellow demesmen by reference to these isolated body parts. Thus the question we have to answer is why in Greek magical practice the person is in some sense dislocated and reduced to a handful of fractured yet apparently essential parts.

Magic and Analogy

The preceding discussion has carried us somewhat further afield from Frazer, but it illustrates in various ways how some of the key assumptions that underlie his sympathetic principles have been productively, if rather differently, amplified. There is, however, one assumption implied in Frazer's sympathetic principles that we have not addressed, and this concerns the problem of *analogy*. In homeopathic or imitative magic, an analogy is created between the magical behavior and the effects desired. Frazer had described this as an incorrect association of ideas that like produces like and that an effect resembles its cause. As a cardinal example he had unearthed a flurry of cross-cultural examples of image magic or the creation of figurines, on which for the infliction of harm cultures never seemed to tire of exercising their imagination. Stabbing, burning, pricking, piercing, shooting, ripping, tearing, burying, and stomping were all acceptable activities exercised on figurines that manifested a variety of emotional attitudes toward the intended victim, although one must be careful to contextualize each of these actions with emotions that are relevant for the culture under consideration. Hence stabbing or piercing do not necessarily imply anger, as we might be inclined to think from

our own cultural experience, and in the case of Greek magical figurines in particular piercing may not even imply pain.

The first order of problem with analogy that we have to consider is the notion of the copy in homeopathic or imitative magic. According to Michael Taussig, Frazer (in the vein of Edward Tylor before him) implies in his extensive treatment of image magic that the images are copies that represent their intended victim. So much, one might say, seems straightforward. But Taussig draws attention to the idea that for this kind of magic to be effective, the copy must affect the original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of what is represented.[27] To him this is a disturbing notion because a copy implies an original and at least ostensibly suggests that in fact it needs to resemble that original to some degree. So he asks, "How much of a copy does the copy have to be to have an effect on what it is a copy of?"[28] The problem is that, as many scholars since Frazer have noted, image magic can often employ "copies" that in no way resemble the human beings who serve as their targets. In Greek examples that we shall consider later, clay or waxen images at times are lumpy and unshapely, at best rude examples of persons they are supposed to represent. Moreover, many cultures including Mediterranean ones also employ stones, wood, bones, dough, barley-meal, earth, plants, clothing, precious metal – virtually any imaginable material – to make magical effigies, leaving open the question of how a "copy" is meant to resemble its "original," let alone how that copy comes to be invested with the properties of the original. There is no simple answer to these questions, because image magic depends to a large extent on cultural conventions of representation that have to be examined in a broader context. We can also put the problem another way by asking what are the strategies of representation employed by a given culture such that a piece of wood or stone can be used in image magic.

This brings us to the second order of problem with the notion of analogy, namely the very idea of representation itself. It seems difficult when studying magic to avoid grappling with some notion of representation, insofar as a given magical act – for instance in weather magic, as when one stirs a bowl of water with a finger to create inclement weather – seems to encapsulate in miniature its intended consequences. Many scholars assume, therefore, that magic uses symbolism as its strategy of representation. Image magic is again the classic example. But what does the term *symbolism* in the context of image magic mean? For instance, do we mean that an image is 'symbolic' to the participants themselves or only to outsider observers? The distinction is important because if it is not kept carefully in view, it is all too easy to attribute symbolic meaning to

behaviors that from the participants' perspective are not indirect, but direct, immediate, and efficacious acts of communication. For example, Greeks and Egyptians left food offerings for the images of their gods, but if we as outsiders call this behavior 'symbolic' we will overlook the fact that these are "*real physical interactions*" with divinity, in the words of Alfred Gell.[29] Images in the form of temple statues offered the Greeks channels of access to their divinities, and there is ample evidence that from their perspective there was nothing at all 'symbolic' about their behavior toward them. In other words, it is not by offering food to a statue that the Greeks were representing how a statue might eat, *as if* it ate in some other way which the food offering was meant to symbolize. Instead, one offered food because that was how a statue ate – in other words, we have to accept that to Greeks statues were physically capable of eating. This is not to say that idols and images are not at times used symbolically as aids to religious piety. But where such idols function as vehicles of divinity and where, as in the Greek and Egyptian worlds, statues and figurines explicitly embodied divinity, it is inappropriate to analyze the behavior toward them as 'symbolic'. The sense of agency exhibited in magical behavior, in the formulation of John Skorupski, is 'literal' not symbolic,[30] and failing to take adequate account of this point risks mischaracterizing magical behavior as something akin to acting or impersonation. Moreover, to describe an action as symbolic implies some underlying will to representation – as if there were some moment at which the culture in question collectively agreed that thenceforth a stone carving was going to stand for or represent a divinity – whereas in actual practice ritual action of this type always involves inherited behavior and understanding. And as Evans-Pritchard showed, despite his best efforts to engage the Azande on precisely these points, such an inherited understanding may not be susceptible to discursive reflection. If contemporary parallels to ancient behavior are any indication, I daresay few ancient Greeks would have understood the question of whether a divinity's statue was a symbolic rather than a real agent, capable of actually interacting with humans, because the inherited understanding of divine statuary already guaranteed that the latter was possible. We as outsiders begin from the assumption that statues cannot have genuine agency and mobility, making symbolism a rational alternative to explaining how other cultures interact with them. However, these cultures *live the reality* that statues are animate, not only rendering our symbolic interpretation irrelevant but also calling into question our causal understanding of human action, according to which the motivation for human behavior that we do not share is reducible to a set of intellectually defensible propositions.

None of what has been said up to this point removes the problem of analogy in magic. Indeed, analogical thinking in one form or another in my view lies immovably at the heart of ritual behavior in so many different cultures that it is arguably its most characteristic feature. Magical behavior in this respect is no exception. However, we must take extra care that when we use a term like analogy in the context of magic, we do not at the same time allow our own discursive notions of representation or symbolism to come into play when they are unwarranted.

Beyond Frazer

If Frazer's legacy has led to a productive consideration of sympathetic magic by generations of scholars, in other ways some of the underlying assumptions of those sympathetic principles have now been superseded. For example, to the extent that homeopathic and contagious magic were premised on a misunderstanding of natural law, Frazer's theory has largely been proven wrong. Many investigators, among whom the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein ranks in the forefront,[31] have argued that magical practice is not fundamentally concerned with the discovery of natural law. Magic may incorporate ways of thinking that depend upon a society's view of how the natural order works, as it does technology, as Malinowski showed, but magicians are not scientists *in utero*. Thus Frazer erred insofar as he took the causal understanding of natural law to be the main aim of magical practice. In the view of some critics, Frazer erred more profoundly by suggesting that a misunderstanding of (mechanical) cause lay at the heart of magic in the first place. However, as we have seen for instance in the case of the Azande, magical practice does not exclude an understanding of mechanical causation, nor is mechanical cause the only causal system with which magic operates. If read too narrowly, Frazer's model for magic implies an irremediable human error, as Wittgenstein argued, and wrongly suggests that at bottom magic is a response to a scientific hypothesis about how the world works. But not only does this approach fail to account for a certain ceremonialism in human nature – which we might call ritual for ritual's sake – it also does nothing to help us understand why particular forms of magic hold good for a given culture at a given time. Frazer used the particulars of magical practice from hundreds of ethnographic accounts – an extraordinary and largely unparalleled feat to this day – to justify his model of magical principles. Yet every culture's magic has a history that cannot be fully explained by reference to those principles alone.

Tambiah and Persuasive Magic

In rounding out our survey of anthropological approaches to magic we have finally to mention the work on performance by Stanley Tambiah.[32] Tambiah's research brings attention to the performative dimension of magic – the rituals and spells and their enactment – that help to create a magical event. Tambiah's work largely amplifies several lines of thought proposed by Malinowski, especially as found in his *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (London, 1935), and Evans-Pritchard in his *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937). At the risk of oversimplifying Tambiah's careful rereading and elucidation of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard, we can roughly summarize his findings as they apply to the *form* and *function* of magical acts. First, relying on examples taken from Evans-Pritchard, Tambiah shows how the form of magical acts and objects often is conceived within detailed metaphorical and analogical schemes whereby desirable properties of one object or action are transferred to another. The power of analogy, as we have already discussed, is brought out fully within magical action, but before the action can be analyzed, it is crucial for the observer to understand what properties a given object or action are thought to possess within a culture. Only then can the point of a given analogy deployed within magic be grasped. Here is one example taken from the Azande, which deals with their magical treatment of epileptic fits, that Tambiah elucidates:[33]

> Epileptic fits are associated with the red bush monkey, which is thought to display certain movements resembling epileptic symptoms. Before sunrise this monkey seems to be in a torpor, but as he comes out of it under the warm rays of the sun, so does the epileptic slowly recover when placed in the warmth of a fire. One of the remedies for epilepsy is to eat ashes of the burnt skull of the red monkey. Superficially considered, it seems inconsistent and absurd that the ashes of the skull of the "epileptic" monkey can cure an epileptic man. But in fact the analogy moves in two steps, exploiting the fact that although the monkey's movements resemble epilepsy, yet it is a normal occurrence for the monkey to revive daily from its torpor under the warm rays of the sun, and the same recovery is desired in the patient. It is this capacity of the monkey to revive daily that is persuasively exploited by the rite of eating the ashes of the monkey's skull.

Several analogies are at work here. The Azande associate epileptic fits with the movements of the red bush monkey. This association allows further analogies to be drawn, so that the monkey's daily "recovery" seems applicable to an epileptic patient, who is also known to be

capable of recovering in a similar way after being placed near a fire. What remains is to effect a transfer of the monkey's ability to recover to the patient, and this transfer is enacted quite directly by having the patient eat the ashes of the monkey's skull. What Tambiah's research shows is that it is above all critical to understand the network of analogical and metaphorical taxonomies a given culture like the Azande has created for the objects, animals, plants, colors, geography, and so forth, in their environment. Every culture imposes on its physical environment some kind of classification scheme, whether it be deployed practically to distinguish helpful or harmful plants[34] and animals or whether, as in magical or ritual action, the positive values in that scheme are exploited to solve some practical problem, such as a physical ailment.

In the words of Tambiah, the rite "persuasively" exploits the monkey's desirable qualities, and to understand what he means by this we turn to his work on Malinowski. The essence of Tambiah's interpretation of Trobriand magic, as first presented by Malinowski, is that a magical act is inextricably bound up with speech and ritual actions. But this is not as transparent a proposition as it at first seems. For the Trobriands, magic involves sacred speech, originally handed down to men from their first ancestors and culture heroes, which has the defining characteristic of being able to influence events in the world. Ritual action not only taps sacred myth – in other words ritual action incorporates mythical imagery and narrative – it has its own "grammar," according to which its nonverbal acts can be organized. This approach to ritual is characteristic of anthropologists who have made what is sometimes called the "linguistic turn," meaning that they have found analogies from historical linguistics and textual language to be helpful in explaining ritual action. For our purposes what is significant is that for Tambiah ritual action, just as language, is a sign system that can be used to exploit metaphors and analogies inherent in a culture's system of meaning. Conversely, relying on philosophy of language theory proposed mainly by J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), Tambiah shows that under certain socially determined contexts and conditions words are equivalent to action. To take just one non-magical example, when an American jury pronounces a verdict of "Guilty" or "Not Guilty" before the judge and court, it not only makes an evaluative judgment about a defendant, it simultaneously changes the status of the defendant's relationship to the court and society. These words, uttered at the socially appropriate moment, actually bring a new reality into being. Although Tambiah perhaps lays more stress on ritual language than on magical action in his overall analysis of magic,[35] he recognizes that it is fundamentally the two together that create a magical event. The conglomerated action is "persuasive" partly

because it anticipates future events, as Malinowski first suggested, and attempts to bring into existence a state which is not yet achieved. More importantly it is persuasive because the analogical nature of magical action implies a desired transfer of positive or negative qualities or properties. As we have already noted, in broad terms magic publicizes someone's desire to influence events, often in a ritually emphatic way, but both magical objects and magical actions are structured through analogy, imitation, simile, and metaphor (themselves forms of analogy) – all of which Frazer generally subsumed under the term *sympathy* – that depend for their efficacy on invisible, but nonetheless real, relationships between the magic and its intended target.

It is within the wider scope of ritual action generally, and with attention to the effect of ritual on its participants, that Tambiah offers this succinct characterization:[36]

> Thus, it is possible to argue that all ritual, whatever the idiom, is addressed to the human participants and uses a technique which attempts to restructure and integrate the minds and emotions of the actors. The technique combines verbal and nonverbal behavior and exploits their special properties. Language is an artificial construct and its strength is that its form owes nothing to external reality; it thus enjoys the power to invoke images and comparisons, refer to time past and future, and relate events which cannot be represented in action. Nonverbal action, on the other hand, excels in what words cannot easily do – it can codify analogically by imitating real events, reproduce technical acts, and express multiple implications simultaneously. Words excel in expressive enlargement, physical actions in realistic presentation.

Because magical action is ritual action we can readily apply Tambiah's view to all of the magic we will encounter in this book. Note first his emphasis on the human participants as the audience for ritual or magical action. This refers to the indispensable social framework within which ritual and magic take place. We can actually extend this notion further and suggest that even when an individual performs magic alone or in private, it is nevertheless within an imagined social framework that it becomes effective. In other words, because magic is aimed at influencing behavior, whether of human beings or even of demonic agents such as illnesses that threaten to attack, magic always becomes efficacious within the community of agents that are understood to have influence in the world. In my view, Tambiah's most important contribution to our understanding of magic is in recognizing how verbal and nonverbal action interpenetrate one another. If ritual imitates a realistic presentation – stabbing a doll to cause pain in a victim – at the same time that it can exaggerate or

telescope that presentation, then spells complement and enlarge upon the ritual action by invoking further comparisons and contrasts. The series of analogies created by the combination of words and action is not then fundamentally reducible to one interpretation. This is a key point, because it means that magic is expansive – new metaphors realized through action or language can be created and old ones can continually be reinvoked – and this helps to explain the adaptability of magic to new circumstances, new contexts, and even to new cultures over time. The very fact that image magic is attested for over two thousand years in cultures in the Mediterranean basin and European cultures farther north, which continued to be influenced by Greco-Roman practices, cries out for such an explanation. This could only have happened if the practice of image magic continued to retain a certain authority derived from its antiquity on the one hand, while on the other being open to newer interpretations consistent with the changing institutional and religious realities of later times. Indeed, Greco-Roman magical practices actually form the basis of later medieval and early modern perceptions of witchcraft.

Conclusion

There are several specific questions worth emphasizing in light of our review of the major, mainly anthropological, theorists of magic. Our survey has not been exhaustive, but it has touched upon the most significant directions researchers have taken in their investigations of magic. For any given magical object or instance of magical action, we have to bear in mind the fundamental question of *agency* – which means we have to ask how the magic works, or what or who makes it effective. Since magic relies on invisible forces, we have to ask what those forces are and how are they perceived. Since we know that magic operates within analogical frameworks, we must pay particular attention to the metaphors, similes, and imitative acts that are involved, while being careful to separate truly imitative acts from those that are instead real or lived physical interactions. Finally, to understand why magic looks the way it does for a given culture, we have to ask rather straightforwardly why it looks that way and not some other way. In other words, we have to investigate its history as magic – for instance were certain ritual actions always considered magical by the culture in question, or did a given object that was not formerly magical become so at some point in time? If we ask these kinds of questions, without getting too bogged down in our own preconceived definitions of magic, we have a better chance of grasping something of what Greek magic was in action. As we shall see in a moment, the Greeks used many often interchangeable terms for

magic and had their own ideas about what it was and how it originated. However, what the Greeks called magic is often indistinguishable from their officially sanctioned cult practices – what we, but not even they, would call their "religion."[37] It therefore does an outsider no good to regard, for example, one form of purification as "magical" and another "religious," if both fall under some commonly understood framework for what makes purification effective, or what makes it interesting or necessary to do. Those are the things that our questions ought to seek to answer because they bring us closer to what magic was for the Greeks.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that both the terms *magic* and *religion* have limited value insofar as they artificially divide practices that for all intents and purposes can be the same. The distinction between magic and religion, still employed by many Western scholars even today, emerged as early as the fourteenth century CE, and took firm hold in the sixteenth, when Reformation Protestant theologians began propagandistically to label Catholic sacramentalism and church ritual as magic as a way to distinguish their own practices from those of the medieval church.[38] These writers well understood that, for instance, the inherited terms *magia*, *magicus*, *maleficium*, *maleficus/a*, *veneficium*, and *veneficus/a* had original, pagan Roman meanings, which were in turn further defined in the works of Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) and especially in the law codes of the late antique emperors Theodosius II (401–50 CE) and Justinian (ca. 482–565 CE). Moreover, all of these Roman terms harked even further back into Greek pagan antiquity, leaving open the question of how relevant they were already in the fourteenth, let alone in later centuries. But their immediate concerns were to reformulate a new definition of (Protestant) Christianity that was emphatically not based on the seven Catholic sacraments (baptism, confirmation, marriage, the Mass, ordination, penance, extreme unction). Because these sacraments looked like magic they called into question the Catholic church's cardinal distinction between magic, which was relegated to the Devil and his servants, and miracles, which were alone reserved for God and his agents. Hence Protestant writers tendentiously employed the ancient Roman terms, along with a host of newer medieval creations, to attack their Catholic adversaries. This complex and fascinating history, which need not directly concern us and which has been explored in massive detail by the historian Keith Thomas[39] and more recently by Stuart Clark,[40] was crucially important to the distinction between magic and religion embraced by both Tylor and Frazer. Although this history is not of immediate concern in the present work, it should encourage us to keep separate the terminological distinctions of magic and religion and their unique history from the investigation of ritual practices. In antiquity, ritual practices often go

without explicit labels or bear labels that shift at the convenience of an ancient critic.[41]

This does not mean that we will always find completely satisfactory answers to our questions about magical practices, and here is where comparative approaches can be of help. The particulars of a given cultural context will always be definitive in any interpretation of magic, and comparative approaches often tell us what to look for to help frame that interpretation. As we look more closely at examples of Greek magic, we will have many opportunities – especially in cases where we lack evidence for how a given magical act was performed – to draw out some plausible implications for how it was understood to work by its practitioners. There is a good deal here that for readers familiar with the scholarship on ancient magic, I hope, will be new. Some of the best current research on ancient magic tends too cautiously to be descriptive and authors hesitate to advance interpretations that cannot be supported by textual evidence. Unfortunately, Greek magic involved non-textual objects and ritual action that were not always directly described. But this does not mean that we cannot offer, in line with comparative approaches, a plausible if at times provisional interpretation. Indeed, beginning in the fifth century BCE the outlines of what we might call a theory of magic become fairly well defined, giving us an important basis from which to start. Nevertheless, we must always bear in mind the caveat that the average Greek users of magic, as against their elite and literate social counterparts who had a vested interest in controlling it, probably gave little thought to how magic worked. They just knew that it did.