

Magic, Innovation and Decision Making

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Almost fifty years ago, Professor Omar K. Moore of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology published his classic analysis of magical rites used by Quebec-based Montagnais and Naskapi Indians to enhance their hunting practices in the time before contact with European societies. The technique used by the native peoples, when the caribou were scarce and the community was imperiled, was roughly this: the shoulder blade of a previously eaten animal was slowly heated over an open fire; in time, the bone would crack; the direction of the crack was interpreted to be the direction to be followed if the herd was to be found and survival ensured. The indigenous explanation was that the soul of the caribou was trapped in the bone and, when it escaped through the crack, it immediately returned to its living companions; it was therefore necessary only to follow in the same direction for a successful hunt.

What troubled Moore was that this apparently daffy bit of superstition seemed to work. The magic produced favorable results. As a 20th century scientist with expertise in statistics, Moore had little time for caribou souls - in or out of shoulder blades. A "rational" explanation had to be found.

Moore learned that this ritual was performed only in times of crisis. Normally, hunting patterns were predictable. When game was ample, the hunters had no difficulty; when it became scarce, hunters sought it out in traditional places, in tried and true locales; even when it seemed to disappear, the hunters kept rigorously to their past "hunting grounds," with increasingly disastrous results. Only a magical appeal to the spirit world saved the people.

On the basis of Moore's analysis, we have developed a propositional inventory that not only summarizes his argument but also provides a guide to the solution of dilemmas raised in our own society by the uncritical pursuit of technological "quick-fixes" to our problems:

1. Human beings tend to want to survive;
2. Attainment of specific goals tends to enhance the possibility of survival;
3. Therefore, human beings tend to be goal defining and purposive in terms of specific, short-range survival needs;

But ...

4. Human beings are also creatures of habit and are likely to repeat patterns of behavior which have previously led to specific goal attainment;
5. Habitual behavior leads to unimaginative responses in novel or crisis situations;
6. Therefore, in situations of dramatic social or environmental change, it may be useful to eliminate human biases, choices and preferences with reference to the selection of survival strategies;

... Because

7. Where such factors are not eliminated, habitual responses to novelty and crisis may generate massive and systematic errors leading to the ultimate collapse of life support systems;
8. In order to eliminate such factors, human beings require social structures which systematically randomize human behavior in situations where the avoidance of fixed patterns of action may prove advantageous;
9. In situations of extreme novelty or grave crisis, such social structures become essential;

... Now

10. Most magical and religious rituals can function as responses to novelty and crisis;
11. Most magical and religious rituals eliminate immediate, purposive human behavior and remove conscious human preference from decision making;
12. Therefore, by randomizing otherwise rigid human responses, magical and religious rituals may actually increase the probability of genuinely rational decision making;

... So

13. Appeal to god's mercy, when it results in the elimination of human influence in response to novelty or crisis is to be encouraged.

If native peoples found a way to let magic assist in the caribou hunt, it may not be too late for us to address such human problems as pollution, poverty, intolerance and war by setting aside the currently hegemonic forms of amoral hyperrealism and opting for ... well, something else. And if this seems perversely to be an instance of irrationalist "devil's advocacy," let us at least remember that William Blake - as good a model as any for these purposes - insisted upon drawing Jehovah with cloven hooves.

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