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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The renaissance of magical thinking, a challenge for bioethics

El renacimiento del pensamiento mágico, un reto para la bioética

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Abstract

In industrialized countries, the common mindset pivots around personal performance. People identify their worth with their performance, consequently they identify their duty with their role. Consequently, being good gears in their jobs is all that is requested to them, and grants good behavior y good consequences. Being good gears, people suppose that they automatically achieve what they aspire to. This can be called "magical thinking" because it owns three main features that define the word "magic": simpleness, immediacy, and effortlessness. The aim of this paper is examining if and how this really happens in three fields: medicine, ethics, and general life. Secondary aim is detecting what is boosting magic in modern life. The conclusion is that magical thinking is widespread in industrialized societies.

Keywords: *Bioethics. Challenge. Argumentation. Magical thinking.*

Resumen

En los países industrializados, la mentalidad común gira en torno al desempeño personal. Las personas identifican su valor con su desempeño, por tanto identifican su deber con su rol. En consecuencia, ser buenos engranajes en su trabajo es todo lo que se les pide, y otorga buen comportamiento y buenas consecuencias. Al ser buenos engranajes la gente se ilusiona con que se conseguirá lograr automáticamente lo que uno desea. A esto se le puede llamar «pensamiento mágico», porque posee tres características principales que definen la palabra «magia»: sencillez, inmediatez y falta de esfuerzo. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar si esto realmente sucede y cómo sucede en tres campos: la medicina, la ética y la vida en general. El objetivo secundario es detectar qué está impulsando la magia en la vida moderna. La conclusión es que el pensamiento mágico está muy extendido en las sociedades industriales.

Palabras clave: *Bioética. Reto. Argumentación. Pensamiento mágico.*

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Premise and aims

A new phenomenon is being imposed in the ethical arena: the magic thinking (MT). Unlike the magic we were used to, this is neither esoterism nor sorcery and threatens humans and their health. This new magic has two faces. The first is the idea that every health or lifelong problem can/should find an easily available solution: a pill, a technology, or an automatic solution to a moral dilemma. The second is the certainty that an easily available solution will be provided for every problem. This is what I call MT.

The aim of this paper is to describe this phenomenon in three scenarios: medicine, bioethics, and common life. Then, we will analyze some factors that can influence negatively and promote MT. At last, some proposals will be advanced to show a possible exit strategy.

The scenario

In industrialized countries, the gap from natural events, from the cycles of nature, or from the bare physical contact between people, has produced interhuman relationships mediated by technique and technology. In these countries, people are no longer able to provide for their needs, except through tools and hardware that people can maneuver but cannot master: if these tools break up, people get frustrated as they cannot repair them and they have no alternatives.

Nonetheless, with the bare presence and possession of these tools, people get reassured, as they make people believe that "all is within your range": everything is described as possible in industrialized countries. This is comprehensible: by clicking a button you can open a door in your yard, speak with a person abroad, buy anything anywhere, and even flash a bomb. This gives a sense of almightiness and omnipotence[1].

In this text, I will illustrate why this behavior marks the return to MT, and how bioethics can be a shelter against this involution.

Magical thinking

MT can be described as the belief that the complex reality can be modified with: (a) simple and simplistic tools, (b) without effort, and (c) at one's wishes. In fairy tales, tools for this purpose were a spell, a filter, a magic wand. Now, MT is no longer a matter of magic as we knew it, but its core and aim seem similar.

MT characterizes the very first stages of human life; during the earliest months of life[2], infants think that they are creating their world, their mother, their milk, and their mothers' breast, but they soon understand that it is a false belief; the world has its own reality that clashes with the child's will. Once the child collides with this reality he/she despairs and enters into a crisis[3]. Now, this magic mindset has spread to adulthood, with ominous consequences. We will see here how the

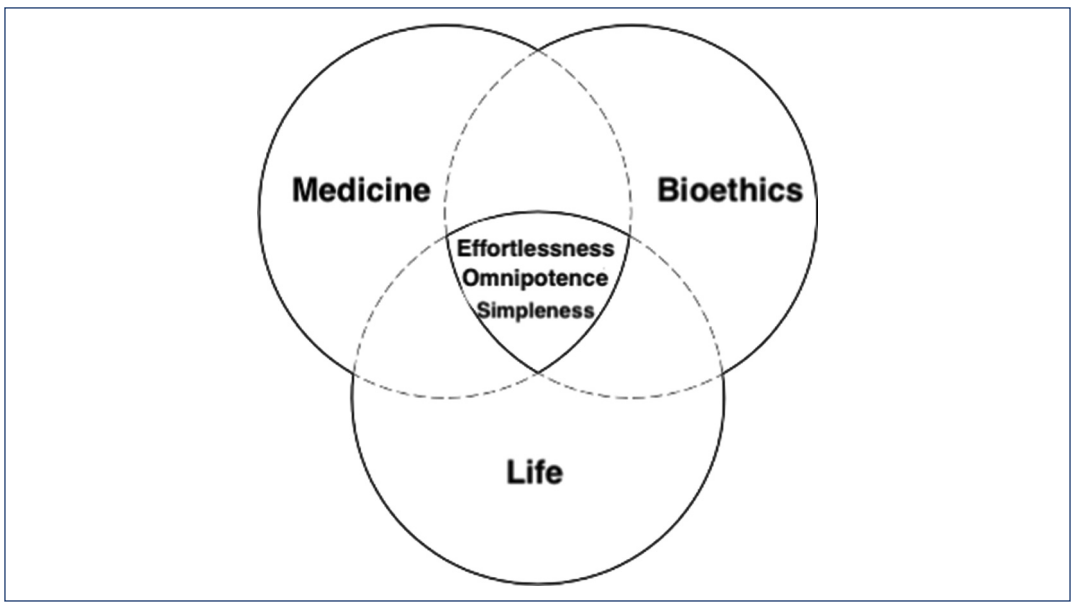

Figure 1. Three important fields have in common the magical resolution of problems. Nonetheless, a part of their activity is still free and can overcome this threat.

three characteristics of magic mentioned above (immediacy, effortlessness, and omnipotence) are present in modern society (Fig. 1).

The medical world

When the public debate bumps into the word "health," there is a tendency to look for the simplest resolution, with two features: the certainty that all is under control and that a chemical/mechanic solution should exist. Everything seems possible for medicine[4].

This is the case for pain. Pain in our society cannot even be named; it is supposed to automatically disappear with the correct treatment: the vulgate of the performing world says that any flaw should find its correction; therefore, any suffering should find its pill. The unexpected is a taboo; it "cannot happen"[5,6] and if it happens, it should be immediately circumscribed. The idea of pain is just inadmissible in Western society. This is the world described by Herbert Marcuse, ruled by the performance principle[7] which forces people to be zealous toward their own role and promptly respond to it; with the consequence that they similarly expect everything in nature to promptly respond to their requests[8]; and the disappearance of pain seems an automatically guaranteed right.

This produces two automatic reactions when illness looms: the request of an antidote that works at once; and, when this is not possible, despair. Despair has two faces: the abrupt request of dying and the sad resignation to suffering. There is no room for the idea of medical failure: when this happens, it is felt as an injustice or a personal offense. This is one of the reasons why people with disabilities in industrialized countries are marginalized: they remind the truth of human limits that none want to admit.

The second example is the recent approach to the COVID pandemic. The quest for a magic and almighty solution has emerged during the COVID epidemics. It should be clear: a vaccine is welcome and will save many lives; most of us believe that vaccination is a moral imperative for the respect toward our lives. Nonetheless, the vaccine has been seen as an "absolute" and unique source of health[9] rather than one of the possible approaches. Everyone was expecting a thaumaturgic and charismatic vaccine, wondering with surprise why such a definitive treatment had not suddenly been available at request. Politicians and mass-media restlessly announced the arrive of the definite vaccine and of the ultimate dose. Some religious authorities that once used to see epidemics highlighting first as a moral reminder to penitence and only later as an imperative of curing the sick, here seem to be announcing the vaccine as their priority[10]. This eager quest has misdirected from a complete approach to health that includes prevention, environment, solidarity, and hygiene.

This is the attitude of modern society, where relief and healing seem automatically guaranteed: "if I pay my taxes and do my job, I have done all I should do; thus, I am supposed to automatically be spared from suffering" could be the motto.

The clinical scenario

Hospitals have turned into hubs where this rite is celebrated. Hospitals were created 1000 years ago to take care of pilgrims, orphans and poor people, providing shelter and hospitalization, and along with therapies and cures. Today hospitals abandoned their role of shelter have become hubs that address to the opportune specialist people searching this "guaranteed" resolution of their problems. It is the consumeristic medicine. In the previous paragraph, we have described the eager quest of a savior-pill; here, we introduce the consequence of this quest: hospitals turned into cure-dispensers (instead than care-centers). , while they should be a fine welcoming center capable of taking care of the whole patient, and not only of their symptom.

Much legal litigation rises from this approach: if the doctor-patient relationship is just a matter of requiring and providing treatments, if it is just a matter of contracts and not an alliance, when the treatment fails, people are inevitably upset and overwhelmed: they cannot accept that the medicine, which was supposed to be almighty, has failed, and medical litigations soar.

Beyond medicine

The breakthrough of magic into the world is not limited to medicine. We see examples in all those human activities where the calculative ability has taken precedence over other abilities (empathy, beneficence, altruism, and imagination). In calculative abilities, only one answer is expected and accepted as the consequence of a need, and the most human activities are performed automatically, with a determined stimulus-response effect.

When we are hungry, we open the refrigerator; we have eliminated all the possible reactions (hunting, delaying the meal, and gardening) except one. When the light goes down in the evening,

we turn on the light bulb; we no longer know how to light a fire in the fireplace, nor do we think of going to the window to enjoy the last lights of the sunset. When the temperature is just above a certain threshold, air conditioning starts, and when it is below it, radiators automatically turn on. In the evening, the loan irrigation starts without any command. Some of these actions happen automatically. This is something magical: we have a need and with a magic wand (a button and a handle) the answer appears. It is the victory of the calculative thinking described by Martin Heidegger[11]: any relationship between things and people other than calculation is excluded, under the illusion that the result of that calculation brings happiness; and when this relationship fails, it is inevitable to be disappointed and surprised. As a consequence, people living in economically advanced countries have become the weakest people in the world, because they have abdicated to get any relationship between things and people other than calculation and technology; and when the technology does not work or is not available, they no longer know how solve their problems.

Other examples of everyday MT are the illusions of happiness proposed by the advertisements: purchases are supposed to change your life, and words like “happiness,” “adoration,” and “joy” are automatically associated with them. Not to forget, as examples of magic, the widespread attraction among young people to prefer pseudo-professions with immediate gain without effort such as that of influencers or bloggers.

Magical thinking in ethics

Even in the field of moral decisions, we note the tendency to MT, that is to indulge to automatic solutions, which eliminate the complexity of judgments, of personal situations, of the interactions between problems. This sometimes affects even safely founded ethical approaches.

An example is offered within utilitarianism, in particular, I refer to the quality-adjusted life-year (QALY) used by utilitarian philosophers to understand which subject has the right to undergo health treatment[12]. Since health is a function of length of life and quality of life, the QALY was developed as an attempt to combine the value of these attributes into a single index number. The QALY calculation is simple: the change in utility value induced by the treatment is multiplied by the duration of the treatment effect to provide the number of QALYs gained. This parameter can be used to compare the cost-effectiveness of any treatment, and in particular, the right of a single person to receive health treatments.

One magical drift in bioethical thought is abstractionism. For example, it is discussed whether euthanasia is acceptable in the case of intractable pain, but it is not explained what is meant for “intractable pain” “unbearable pain,” leaving room to subjectivity. Many reports tell us that terminally ill patients are still not treated accurately for pain and mental suffering; so how can you give the green light to the suspension or ban of treatments if all the necessary steps have not been taken? These steps are complex, but in bioethics debates, they are magically simplified by dividing people into fields. The split between “pro-choice” and “pro-life” supporters, or between “prohibitionists” and “liberals” in the fields of end-of-life and abuse of drugs, respectively, are abstract divisions, useful in politics but not in a real humanitarian bioethical debate (Fig. 2). Nonetheless, they propose for complex problems a simple, immediate, omnipotent, and therefore magic, response; it magically seems that it is enough to support one of these parties to make a concrete

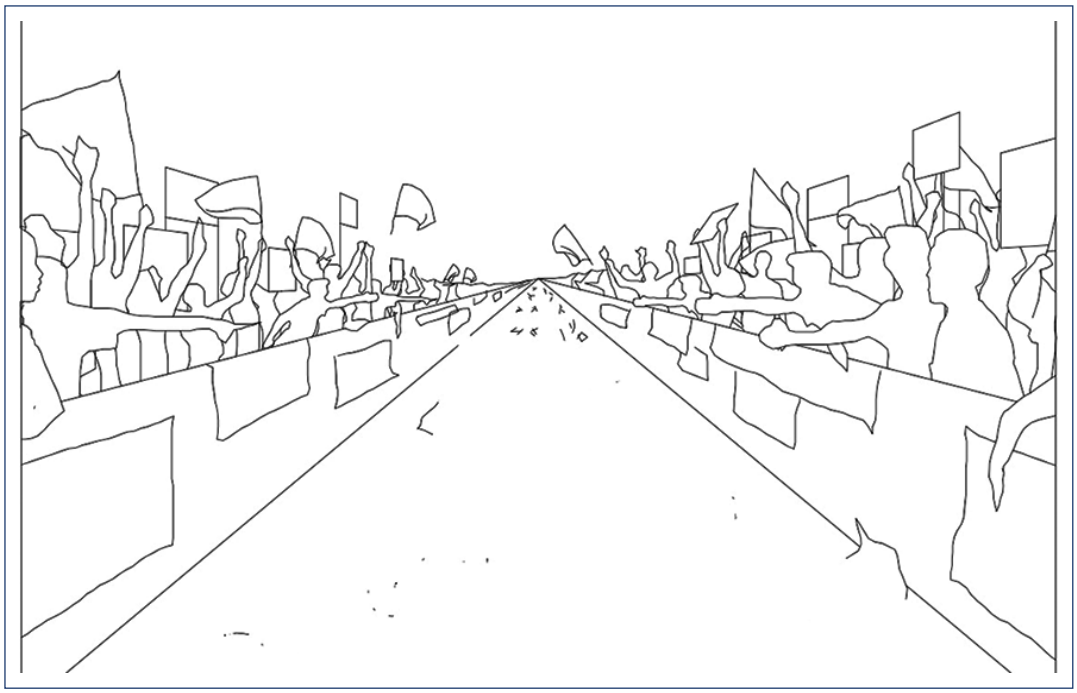

Figure 2. The juxtapositions in ethical debate. Taking a part in ethical debate is an attempt to support an idea, but it discloses the functionality of modern ethics to jurisprudence: ethical principles seem to have been created to give the legislator or judge the tools to understand and decide, but lead to incommunicability.

Table 1. The features of "magic"

The need to reduce a complex dilemma to a matter that can be solve at once (immediateness)
The need of getting an immediate and reassuring response to an anxiety (omnipotence)
The idea that all will be fixed definitively with a remedy (effortlessness)

ethical choice. Moreover, this type of MT discloses the subordination of modern ethics to jurisprudence (Table 1).

An illusory optimism

An illusory optimism is the color of this past century: thinking that there is an automatic solution to every problem and believing it faithfully and acritically. This is well illustrated in the recent movie "Do not look up," directed by Adam McKay, where a society of stubbornly optimistic people, reduced to their own roles, and cannot see the evidence of the final approach of a lethal threat: they just cannot imagine that something can go wrong or produce pain, and their reactions are simple automatisms. When the drama arrives, in the form of an asteroid that crashes on earth, they cannot even realize that it is all true.

When optimism is evidently impossible, people simply despair or close tight their eyes in order not to see: thence the abuse of drugs, from alcohol to cocaine, from video games to tobacco with the aim of pretending that any problem can be skipped by a simplistic action. This is MT too. Even the simplification of social problems by offering civil rights instead than social rights is another form of MT. People are anguished for starving, violence, unemployment, pollution, and they are on the converse offered drug liberalization or assisted suicide, with a force that makes them forget their needs and believe that the latter magically will resolve all their anguish.

The actors of this phenomenon

When we want spot the forces that drive the renaissance of magic, we should wonder who gets a benefit from it. Consider the renaissance of magic means that getting people play with unrealistic toys, while others can rule economics and politics undisturbed. Thus, here, we outline two forces which get profit from a people turned childish: politics and drug sellers. Then, we describe the main support of the two: mass media. At last, we will outline the scenario over which all this can be possible: the loss of identities.

Politics

Current politics is the first pabulum for MT. Current political behaviors do not go beyond the date of the next elections, leaving the populations in a sort of limbo, where they can consume and thrive, but cannot make projects for the future: it is a hopeless society. Hope is the ability of living a temporal dimension beyond the present, while all political managements in industrialized countries are limited to the present day, to instantaneous consent. Politics needs quick decisions, slogans, and promises of final solutions. MT is hailed by this mindset. On the other hand, politics exploit this MT, letting people be happy in the easy responses, they can get within the mechanical and mental automatisms of everyday life: if people settle with low-level exigences and do not think to social radical changes, this is a real advantage for politicians.

Big Pharma

Several pharmaceutical companies have created much expectative and the illusion of being able to fix any disease. And something more. The “disease mongering,” the invention of non-existent diseases, to sell drugs, mostly ineffective[13] is a well-known phenomenon that exploits the anxiety of the population. Some pharmaceutical companies transform simple symptoms into illnesses, with the clear aim of selling. To this aim, they invest heavy amounts of money to create persuasion campaigns, with testimonials, pitiful cases, and induction of a sense of shame or guilt in the population for having a certain symptom that until the day before was presumed normal and acceptable[14]. This is the case of shyness, renamed “social phobia,” for which ad hoc drugs are created, as well as menopause, osteoporosis, baldness, cellulite, juvenile acne, etc. They are not just selling a remedy, but they are selling an idea: that every matter can be seen as a problem, and that every problem has eventually a solution; last, that the solution to a problem is one and only one.

Mass media

Mass media are among the main culprits of the real epidemic of anxiety that grips much of the Western world. This anxiety is functional to the two main actors for the renaissance of magic, we have just outlined. Laura Allen in the journal Gerontologist so wrote: "A cultural model of panic begins to take shape through the COVID-19 pandemic"[15]. Here are some key points of the mass-media apport to this renaissance.

- The narration of the COVID19 pandemic was carried out with daily bulletins of deaths that looked like catastrophe prophecies[16], provoking confusion and urging people to ask a solution whatever
- Journals and other media exude crime news, robberies, mafia, climatic, and personal disasters[17]. The only apparently reassuring scenarios in mass media are fashion or sport, that anyone follows with the hope of magically feeling free from the depicted disasters[18]
- Short messages, monosyllables, and hieroglyphs are the way people communicate today using tablets, smartphones, laptops, ending up losing their ability to write, and pauperizing their vocabulary[19]. The "reduction to elementary" is the artwork of magic
- Media vision seems to be a cause of a widespread attention deficit across the population[20]. Movies made up of short and frantic sequences, internet pages obfuscated by banners, ads, and redundant reminders to privacy which make it difficult to concentrate and follow a stream of thoughts[21]. Moreover, a population with low attention is easily manipulable, and it will easily search quick answers rather than complex and more appropriate ones[22].

The age of the end of the conflicts

Politics and profit-makers might not proceed toward the renaissance of magic without a precondition: the loss of identities of persons and peoples. This takes the suasive form of the blunting and disappearance of conflicts.

Intergenerational and interclass conflicts have not disappeared, but they are blunted, repressed, and silent[23,24]. The former ended with the disappearance of the figure of the father and the family, reduced to mere figures of appearance. The latter ended with the replacement of social rights with the civil rights, and with the homologation of both proletarians and bosses to become enthusiastic exploiters of technology. The "loss of the father"[25] means the loss of the figure that sets the limit of the possible, which shows that not everything is possible, and this is necessary to grow, to make children's imagination take off.

Most relationships are hard to live and turn into conflicts; conflicts mean fight, but they are also the sign of a limit and can be constructive[26]. If we make all signs of limits disappear, all seems stupidly possible, and conflicts will be repressed, though interiorised, somatised, and therefore thougher.

Conflicts can be terrible, but the end of conflicts shows the end of human reactivity, in a jam of good intentions that leaves only one way out: a life in which people oddly believe that there is a solution to everything, that all is possible, achievable, and legal (when real problems arrive and all

this crumbles). These are the features of a desperate lonely population and pushed forcedly toward the magic pills.

The responsibility of bioethics

This quest for a magic pill marks the return of magic. After the era of the Kantian rationalism in which human reason was the lens to watch the progress through, and after that of the Wagnerian romanticism in which strength and heart were the center of the cosmos and of the history, the time came for the ideologies and for the 20th century ethical states. The ethical states faded or crashed; only one myth remained, technology, and only one ethical principle took their place: utilitarianism. Technology and utilitarianism can erroneously suggest a return of materialism; but true materialism was historically anchored to social rights, and to hard fights to get them. On the converse, technology and utilitarianism pave a way of automatic and effortless achievements: the way for the rebirth of the MT and magic solutions.

This new magical mindset is Pascal's "geometric spirit" ("ésprit de géometrie") applied where it is not applicable, namely, in humanistic choices. It is the mongering of services and solutions that Lacan called the "capitalist speech"[27]. His thesis is that the ideological and cultural foundation of capitalism is a discourse of untying, of the proliferation of fragmentation and of the precariousness of the existential and social condition. The "discourse of the capitalist" exalts jouissance to the detriment of all forms of bonding. The self-sacrifice typical of the first capitalists is nullified by the imperative of consumerism, seen as consumption. The "discourse of the capitalist" is a manifestation of monocausal positivist thinking, which has drastically reduced social and cultural complexity. It is magic, because it features the three characteristics of MT: immediacy, effortlessness, and omnipotence.

The renaissance

The ethical debate has recently been shaped as juxtapositions between parties, each of which feels to be wright and to have the magic solution for a single well-defined moral problem. Moreover, they see the moral problem, they are concerned with, as the sole or the central moral problem worth of be discussed. This Jansenist approach has stiffed the debate.

These parties have been categorized into prolife/prochoice and prohibitionist/legalizationists, but these are abstract categories that do not dig to the heart of the matter and the heart of the person. They suppose automatic stereotyped responses. Magic is an automatic response and these parties just support automatic responses to complex matters. These group deserve much respect for their commitment and efforts, but both sides should make a step forward, including complexity in their arguments; only some of them are already trying to do this.

We cannot separate ethics from virtues and virtues do not give immediate solutions, but forge the person to find them out. This is the difference between magic and virtuous. We also might say that this is the difference between virtual and virtuous, a pun that highlights an analogy between

the main feature of our era (virtual life) and magic (the opposite of virtuous). Of course, virtues vary from age to age and from nation to nation, but as Immanuel Kant would have explained, following rules are different than following the moral law we host. The former behavior (following rules) is easy to understand though requires strength and exercise; the latter (following an inner law) is more complex and requires an inner personal change. Magic makes the difference between "obeying" (following rules) and "acknowledging" (following an inner law). The defense from the neo-MT is a personal work on inner virtues, rejecting the simplified flee-or-fight behavior when ethical issues are posed, indulging to reflection and compassion. As Aleksandr Solženicyn wrote[28], "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Moreover, even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained".

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