

Magical Thinking

Are we hard-wired for superstition?



Johannes Plenio

George Matthews, Plymouth State University

2020

Would you ...

Would you ...

wear your grandpa's sweatshirt?



Would you ...

wear a serial killer's sweatshirt?



Would you ...

eat organic, grass-fed beef?



Would you ...

eat lab-grown meat?



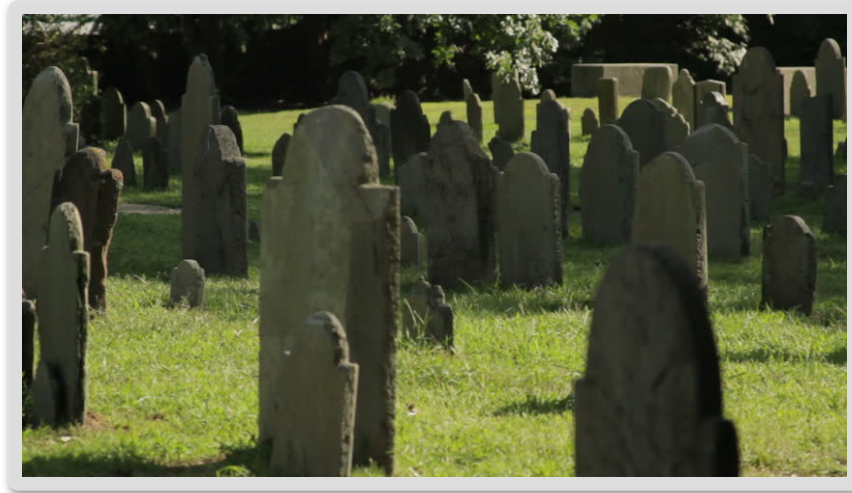
Would you ...

visit the grave site of a loved one?



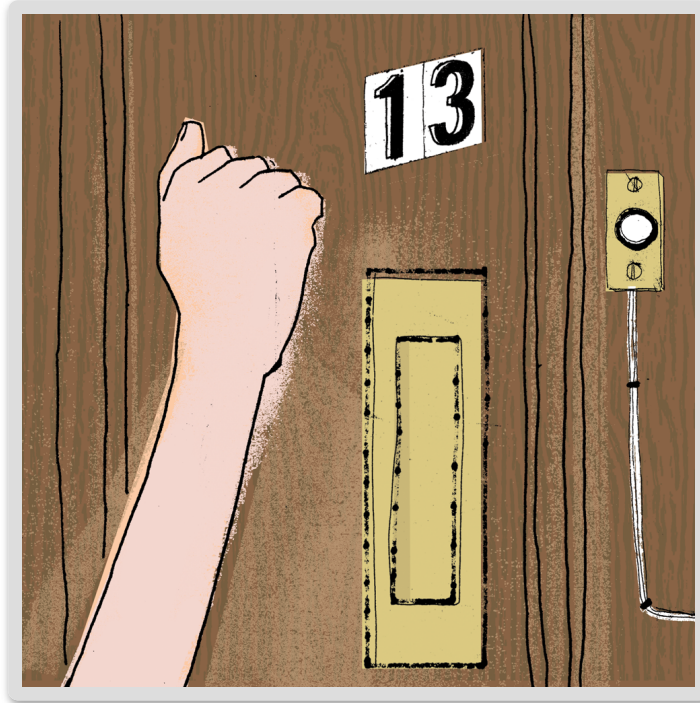
Would you ...

sleep in an old graveyard?



Would you ...

knock on wood to avoid bad things happening?



Would you ...

use a Ouija board?



Approaches to magical thinking

Embrace it:

- "The world just is full of magic!"

Dismiss it:

- "It's nonsense, who are you kidding?"

Tolerate it:

- "It might work for you even if it doesn't work for me."

Try to explain it:

- "It shows us something about how the mind works."

Elements of magical thinking

Essentialism

- Certain things have a fixed inner nature that explains what they do.

Words and thoughts have power

- Language, thoughts and symbols can make stuff happen in the world directly.

Agents are everywhere

- Disembodied spirits, ghosts, divine minds, etc. are always watching and might do things at any moment.

Essentialism

- Some things have essential, permanent features built-in to them.
- These "essences" determine how things behave, and what their "natural place" in the order of things is and should be.
- It is *wrong* to treat things differently than what their essence demands.



Is this a side-effect of our capacity to categorize things and form concepts?

Words and thoughts have power

- Words, symbols and thoughts can have a direct influence on events in the real world.
- Words and thoughts can evoke the dead, cause good or bad things to happen, counteract or enhance the effects of other words.
- Symbols and symbolic objects can influence events from a distance.



Is this a result of our taking literally the power of language and symbolism to suggest and evoke ideas?

Agents are everywhere

- There are hidden beings with minds all over the place.
- Nothing happens by chance and everything happens for a reason.
- Hidden agents create and maintain order, administer justice, help or hinder our plans.



Is this a side-effect of our hyper-developed social minds, coupled with a bias towards paranoia?

find out more

The Psychology of Magical Thinking

Why magical thinking works for some people

Essentialism in everyday thought



Johannes Plenio

[Credits](#)

Built with:

[Rstudio](#)

[xarignan](#) html presentation framework

[download this presentation](#) or [print it](#)