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## On the Theory of Magic

This is the start of a series of essays that I would like to dedicate to the theory of magic, however, it will be *practical theory*. What at first reading might sound contradictory is really a thought that was already formulated by Aristotle: he maintained that thinking itself doesn't move anything, but if thinking is targeted at a purpose it becomes practical.

Many years as a writer of magic books, as well as a coach in lectures, workshops and private lessons, have strengthened in me the belief that although you certainly *move forward* in small steps by learning specific techniques and tricks, you only *grow* by knowing, understanding and applying theories, thoughts and concepts. As Ascanio once remarked to me, «You have to be wide and deep.» Information is important, but only understanding makes a practitioner of any discipline - be it gardening, surgery, music or magic - access the next level of competence in the pyramid of (artistic) excellence. Therefore, this series of columns is about the *thought and practice* that will allow us to do just that, regardless of what level we are currently in, because we are all eternal students.

### This is (Not) a Theory

At a recent magic convention someone said to me, «You know, I hate theory, because I think it isn't any good in magic – all I believe in is doing it in front of an audience and gaining experience.» I answered, «Do you realize that this is a theory?» I can't remember what he then said, but I think it was another theory...

After having been in magic for forty-five years now, I can sincerely affirm that I gained my *competence* to perform magic from practicing and performing a lot, but I got my *understanding* of it from theory.

You can compare this to a sports car: the power and beauty of the car is certainly important, but it is completely useless if you don't know how to drive it and above all where to drive it to, in order to reach your destination. The latter part is pure theory, it is a thought, a plan in your head, and it is only after following that plan with practical tools that you will reach your goal. In any case: we will always have to think first before we act. In this sense there is truly nothing as practical as a good theory, to paraphrase Kurt Lewin (1890-1947).

*A technique can solve a problem, but theory gives you an understanding of it.*

## Who is Afraid of Theory?

There is nothing to be afraid about theory, as it is simply omnipresent at every moment in our lives, where it is even more practical than practice. You might ask: how can theory be more practical than practice? The answer: because something practical is just like a fish, whereas theory is about teaching how to fish. It is the difference between giving you a Dollar and teaching you how to earn your own Dollars. Although the first is an immediate reward, it will not get you far, whereas learning how to earn Dollars will allow you to have a Dollar whenever you need it. However, this second option is not immediate since you have to go through a certain learning process before getting what you want. This, of course, requires time, effort and thinking, which reminds me of Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), who said, «Most people would die sooner than think – in fact they do so».

As an example let's compare learning another move for the «Ambitious Card», a practical thing, with Ascanio's «Theory of In-transit Actions», a theory, which we will discuss in the course of this series of essays. While the move will satisfy our human urge to play and to immediately show off, it merely adds another trick to the (too) many we already have. But understanding and implementing the theoretical concept in our work will make us better magicians, and this will be of consequence to all other tricks we do.

*While a new trick takes us a step forward, a new insight will elevate us to a new level. Which one do you find more useful?*

## A Tip is Not a Theory

Many a magic book gives useful tips along with the tricks and techniques taught, and so do many lecturers, and they pass this off as «theory», since lately theory has become quite popular amongst the practitioners of magic, making some lecturers feel they must include some kind of «theory» to misdirect from the fact that selling is the main purpose of the lecture. However, there is a big difference between a «tip» («keep your thumb from shooting out when you classic palm a coin» – good advice by David Roth) and a «theory» («if you do an action in a harmless context first, it establishes the move and is an action of conditioned naturalness» – good theory by Ascanio).

Both the tip and the theory are based on the insight of how to do something correctly; yet, they are not the same thing. A tip is like a patch on a wound, theory is about the study of medicine. One is a strictly practical, utilitarian approach, the other a conceptual study of a discipline, which eventually might also result in applying a patch to a wound, but doing so will be by the consequence of a comprehensive understanding rather than just knowing how to fix a singular problem.

*Ignoring theory is like saying the milk comes from the supermarket and overlooking that there is a cow behind it.*

## Analysis Versus Intuition

Some have argued against the use of theory, especially in the arts, by saying that thinking, being an analytical thing, will kill the intuition, and that the intuition is the most important tool of an artist's work. This is then further supported by quoting some authority who said that by dissecting the body you kill it. However, the latter is simply a metaphor, and like the map is not the territory, the metaphor is a rhetorical device that sometimes helps understand an abstract concept, sometimes it doesn't. Metaphors deceive as much as they assist, so, be on your guard against metaphors (yes, that was one...).

Fortunately real life is not either/or, leave/take, black/white; it is a synergy that results from combining intellect and intuition, logos and pathos. Head and heart lead the hand, which becomes their extension, and through the instrument (cards, coins, ropes...) expresses who we are and what we believe in. Dai Vernon in his lectures maintained that analytical

and intuitive thinking should be used in equal proportions to learn and improve one's magic – I cannot think of anything wiser to say. I would only add that reason and intuition *do not exclude each other*, but quite on the contrary they increase each other and are like the two sides of a coin.

Learning a new theory is like adding a new approach to solve a problem, a new way to getting to a result, a new vehicle to reach our goal, similar to adding a new tool to our toolbox. By adding a new tool we no longer just have a hammer, and we no longer see our problems (in magic) as being just nails, to paraphrase Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). Having many tools in the toolbox allows us to identify problems in our magic performance that used to be hidden, to make the invisible visible, and then solve them with precision, efficiency and elegance. This is just another reason why a theory is *practical and useful*.

## **Taxonomy**

In *Expert Card Technique* (p. 179) Hugard and Braue wrote: «It should never be forgotten that, while times may change, human nature does not; the conjuror who fails to profit by the hard-won knowledge of his predecessors is indeed a foolish man, for while in a good many instances methods have improved, the basic psychology of deception which they learned by experience still remains the same.» As true as it might be, that many of the classic works of magic are full of advice that can be classed as «theory», what those authors failed to do for the most part, was to codify the experience won.

«Concepts without names are blind.» So says Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), arguably Enlightenment's foremost thinker and some say the father of modern philosophy. This doesn't mean that things do not exist if they are not named; of course, the Double Lift existed before it was called by that name. But as soon as you start to talk or to write about it, you need a term that refers to what was just an action up to its naming.

The next step will be to assign it to a superordinate group of similar procedures. This might result in calling it a «technique», as opposed to for instance an «effect» (production, vanish etc.) or an «instrument» (cards, coins, etc.). And within techniques, which are the operational principles of magic, it might be classified as «a technique for multiple lifts & turnovers».

I'm sure that this procedure at first happened intuitively for the sheer necessity of communicating clearly, albeit it didn't happen systematically – it was a sort of folk taxonomy. Science couldn't exist without taxonomy, which is the naming, classification and study of a body of knowledge. Whenever a scientist writes something or gives a talk it goes by itself that he or she uses the acknowledged terminology and taxonomy, and whenever something new is found, it is placed within the accepted models, or a new model is created that stands in relationship with the known and accepted model. In magic we are still far from this, and it will only be through a study and acceptance of theory that we can hope to one day be able to think about our art on a deeper level.

## **Theory in Practical Texts**

Here is a piece of good news for those who find it arduous to read theory and who prefer straight trick descriptions: *Every good text of magic written by a good author is theory*. By this I don't mean the obvious fact that any technical text is theoretical in the sense that it isn't the real thing, but just tells you about the real thing. What I mean is that a very good text that describes a technique or a trick or any type of practical procedure has one or more layers beneath it that are not put into words, but that harbor useful conceptual thoughts (theory!). As we've seen earlier, concepts are always polyvalent, they can be applied to more than just to the specific procedure being described. In this sense an intelligent reader of an intelligently written text needs to be a bit of an archeologist who enjoys digging up things which lie hidden beneath the surface, or if you prefer you could say that every excellent magic book has theory as a subtext.

*I did write a whole essay on this subject, and you might want to refer back to it (see «How to Read Erdnase» in my column of Genii November 2011).*

## **Viva la Teoria!**

Ultimately the question is: «What is good magic and how can I improve my magic to make me a better magician and my magic better?»

Based on my beliefs I don't think there is an absolute answer that will work for everybody and in every situation – not in life, not in magic. But I do believe that there are several answers that will work very well for each one of us. In order to improve our magic, we've got to have criteria of what magic is and how to perform it. Any type of criteria is theory. If you believe that visual card tricks are better - or that you like them better – than abstract, conceptual card tricks, then you have a theory, whether you want it or not. It will be based on this beliefs and theories that you are going to select and interpret a specific trick.

*In this sense theory builds self-confidence based on competence, because it is about «why» we do things at a profound level.*

I hope that this and the following essays on «practical theory» will assist you as a beginner to uncover and at the same time develop your very own set of criteria that shall lead you on your path to excellence in magic. For the experts among my readers, and I'm honored that there are several, I hope I will be able to put into words what many of them have been doing all along, mostly through talent and experience.

## **Recommended Reading**

If you are interested in gaining an overview on the subject of theory may I suggest that you read or re-read the theory section at the end of my own *Card College Volume 2* (Hermetic Press 1996)? There I deal on almost one hundred pages with what I think are the seven major topics of magic theory: Presentation, Construction, Directing Attention (Misdirection), Technique-Handling-Management, Timing, What to Do When Something Goes Wrong, and How to Study Magic.

Everything that counts is mentioned, defined and explained with practical examples from the *Card College* books. Certain subjects are only briefly discussed, others merely hinted at, but you'll get an idea of the whole and the details that make it up, the terminology of the major thoughts and their relationship to each other, as well as how the body of underlying concepts directly influences the practice of magic. As we progress through this series of essays, I will be recommending other books on the subject, but I think you should start with this one.

Roberto Giobbi – August 2018 (originally appeared in March 2014, titled «On the Theory of Magic» in my column The Genii Session in *Genii Magazine*)

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