

# The Magical Level of Consciousness<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article describes the subjective experience, phenomenology, and lawfulness of the magical level of consciousness (or in Jungian terms the infrared pole of the psyche) as Jean Gebser describes it and as it plays itself out intrapersonally and interpersonally in psychotherapeutic relationships, in particular with so-called borderline clients. There is a comparison between the main characteristics of the magical level and what Gebser calls the mental level of consciousness, i.e., the level of consciousness expected of contemporary adults. Some suggestions are made as to how to deal professionally with the magical level of consciousness both in oneself and in one's relationships to others.

Keywords: Magical and mental levels of consciousness, psychotherapy, borderline conditions, transference and countertransference, Gebser, affective pole of the psyche.

## Introduction

I am sure that you are acquainted with the "magical level of consciousness," as Gebser calls it, under different names such as "pregenital ego states," "undifferentiated ego mass," the primitive mind, or simply as the unconscious. You have probably read about it in the literature on personality development, in particular Piaget's writings. In the psychoanalytic literature, Klein,

Mahler, Balint, and Guilford concentrate on phenomena characteristic of this particular state of consciousness, and so do behavior therapists. Writers on family therapy, in particular Bowen, see the magical state of consciousness, although they do not name it as such, as the source of family pathology, while social psychology-oriented authors, such as Adorno and his coworkers, who have labeled the person operating on the magical level of consciousness the "authoritarian personality," see him as the source of all social evil. The magical state of consciousness is the focus of many anthropological studies and represents the essence of some existential writing of the twentieth century, including that of Kafka, Sartre, and Camus. Kierkegaard's "desperately wanting to be oneself" or "not wanting to be oneself" comes very close to the subjective experience of the magical state.

You have surely encountered phenomena of the magical level of consciousness in your patients, especially in those suffering from borderline syndromes, in your children, and perhaps even in certain emotions and behaviors of your own that you might consider alien to your self view. I have nothing new to contribute to the discussion of this particular state of mind itself. What I hope to contribute is, rather, a demonstration of the inherent lawfulness of this particular state of mind and of its qualitative difference from "ego consciousness," or the "mental state of consciousness," as Gebser<sup>2</sup> calls it. In other words, I think that one needs to look at the magical level of conscious-

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ness as a qualitatively different frame of mind that is ever present and that takes over whenever ego consciousness is either not yet, or not anymore, in existence. In other words, the difference between the magical and mental levels of consciousness is one of qualitative mutation rather than a gradation of quantitative degrees of consciousness. We cannot apprehend the magical level of consciousness by looking at it from our own vantage point but instead must acknowledge that what we consider to be reality is tied to our frame of reference and that there are as many realities as there are levels of consciousness. Just as the reality of the magical level of consciousness is apt to give way to that of the mental level we are familiar with, our own reality may give way to different perspectives if our frame of mind should reach a new phase in future times.

### **Characteristics of People with Borderline Conditions**

In any event, looking at and treating the magical level of consciousness from the perspective of our own frame of mind simply does not work, as I found out the hard way when I tried to be helpful to several of my patients who could be called borderline. These patients kept complaining about their intolerable suffering, while at the same time resisting every effort on my part to help them out of it. They characteristically complained about feeling trapped, of others having power over them, and yet they felt totally responsible for those whose power they resented. They constantly felt compelled to make decisions about their lives, at the same time being unable to make any decisions. They resented their chains, and yet were terri-

fied to break them because this would involve guilt toward those who enchained them as well as the ultimate terror of being alone. They were furious at not being allowed a choice by the other, and yet considered the possibility of choice too terrifying to even contemplate. Although they felt totally entrapped in responsibilities for the other, they could not conceive of being responsible for themselves, for that responsibility was vested in the other. Whenever I tried to disentangle them from this net of cross-responsibilities, they resisted my efforts with every ounce of energy they could muster. The more I tried to help them, the more they let me know how totally inadequate and unhelpful I was as their therapist. As far as they were concerned, the reality toward which I was trying to lead them was totally unreal; moreover, since no one, not even their therapist, understood what they were going through or could offer any solution to their agony, they might as well take the only way out left them, namely, suicide.

### **Working with Borderline Conditions**

You can imagine my feelings of guilt and inadequacy as these accusations went on week after week, sometimes month after month. The patients were getting more and more under my skin, and I became more and more exasperated with them. I became obsessed with thoughts about them, feeling responsible for and fearing what would happen to them. I felt depressed and began to think that my own life was less and less worth living. This was not what I had bargained for in my newly chosen profession of psychotherapy. I had a strong urge to get rid of these patients and spent hour after hour wondering

how I might get out of my own trap. When I complained to my supervisors that I could not stand it any longer, that they would have to assign these patients to a better trained and more sophisticated therapist, I was given the following suggestion: express your own feelings to the patients and let them know that you can't be responsible for them, that you are only human, not the demigod they expect you to be. Though this seemed helpful, I was unable to follow through on it, for, as I realized later, I had myself slipped down into the magical level of consciousness, infected by the patients' state of mind. A second suggestion was that I try to get deeper into my own emotional state of mind, rather than desperately trying to get out of it. It took a while for me to grasp what this meant.

I did stay with the patients, much as I wanted to be miles away from them, and looked for answers in the literature. In reading Balint's *The Basic Fault* (1968) and Kernberg's *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (1975), I began to see that what had happened to me was not at all unusual but, rather, par for the course in working with these kind of patients. I had gained some theoretical understanding of my patients' and my own dynamics, but I still had no firm grasp of the nature of their experiences and of my own experience, which held us each in an overwhelming grip.

### **Different Reality Planes**

Around that time I reread a paper by Erich Neumann entitled "The Psyche and the Transformation of Reality Planes" (1956). Although I had been deeply impressed by it the first time I read it, the reason became clear to me only upon this rereading. It was

as if Neumann spoke directly to my predicament when he stated that there are different realities—not merely reality and unreality—and that each is valid from its own frame of reference. Also, Neumann felt that one can only speak legitimately of projection when a separation of the inner and outer worlds has taken place already, but not when, as on the magical level of consciousness, it has not. Rather, the experience on the magical level (not named as such by Neumann) is one of finding oneself to be a particle in a force field, one pole of a polarity that is, willy-nilly, connected to its opposite, for better or for worse. I shall have more to say about this polarity, which is the key factor in understanding the subjective experience of the magical level of consciousness.

My reading at this time led me to Gebser's *Ursprung und Gegenwart* (1966) and Werner's *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development* (1961). What I found helpful in these writings was that, in contrast to the psychoanalytic literature, they dealt with the phenomenology of the magical state of consciousness, rather than judging it from a different, and later, developmental point of view.

Gebser's description of five consecutive levels of consciousness, but in particular that of the magical level (characteristic of borderline patients, children, and primitives) and that of the mental level (i.e., the state of consciousness characteristic of our current Western civilization), suddenly illuminated the reason for my inability to accept what my patients were saying to me, although they spoke perfectly clear English, and their inability to profit from my initial attempts to help them: we were trying to communicate to one another from two totally different

worlds, with concomitant total differences in “Umwelt, Mitwelt, and Eigenwelt,” each denying these differences and trying to force the other to land in one’s own world. As it was, the patients succeeded: I experienced fully what they were going through, without, however, maintaining the necessary perspective that might have helped them and me *out* of our predicaments.

### “Getting into It” vs. “Getting out of It”

It was at that point that I remembered my supervisor’s suggestion to “get into it” rather than to try so desperately to “get out of it.” I began to adopt the attitude of an anthropologist visiting a culture unknown to him—approaching with open mind, seeking to learn everything while presupposing nothing, and allowing the pieces to order themselves into a coherent whole according to their intrinsic nature. The books of both Gebser and Werner provided me with concepts around which I was able to orient myself as one might with a compass and map in strange territory.

I must say that I could barely believe the miraculous results. As soon as the patients felt that I had stopped trying to get them away from where they were (even though this is what they had asked me to do) and that I understood what their experience was all about and could identify exactly its components and corroborate the reality of their world and of their relations with others, they were able to shift from the magical level of affect to the next higher level, the mythical level of image. Obviously, I also learned a great deal about my own reactions that I had not previously understood.

I hope that sharing my own experiences in encountering this very subjec-

tive, magical state of consciousness will give those who have not met it before an inkling of what it may be like to be caught there. In the balance of the paper I will describe briefly the phenomena of the magical level of consciousness in contrast to those of the contemporary adult, mental level of consciousness; the experience of world, self, and other on the magical level; factors that cause the magical level to be; the purpose the magic level may serve; and, finally, therapeutic interventions.

### Comparison between Magical and Mental Levels of Consciousness

First, then, to a comparison between the magical and mental levels of consciousness. There is on the magical level, first of all, the concept of *oneness*. The other does not exist as such, as an entity in his own right, but only in relation to oneself. He is the other pole of a polarity bond, hence one strives to be united with him. The other is essentially oneself, or, at least, alike to oneself. Should the other turn out to be different from oneself, the situation becomes extremely dangerous, for only one can exist and the other must be annihilated: either you or I will be destroyed. The mental level, on the other hand, is characterized by the concept of duality: there is an outer world and an inner world, you and I, and each (ideally at least) can state what he wants, and we can achieve some sort of compromise if needed.

On the magical level one looks for *closeness* (though one may not be able to tolerate it if it occurs); on the mental level, one seeks distance, a view from a certain *perspective*. On the magical level, one is in *identity with nature*; on the mental level, one stands *opposite to nature*.

The magical level expresses itself in affect and emotion, like and dislike, pleasure and pain, power and powerlessness. Everything is assessed in relation to the subjective reaction it arouses in oneself. On the mental level one attempts to *abstract* from one's subjective reaction and to get an *objective* view of the phenomena themselves. Hence, as Jung (1969) observed long ago in his work on complexes, whenever we are overcome with affect, we have lost our objective stance, i.e., we have been pulled down to the magical level of consciousness.

The most important body organs on the magical level are the *gastrointestinal tract* and the *ear*, while the mental level stresses the *brain* and the *eye*. People who are confined to the magical level of consciousness usually suffer from disturbances of the G.I. tract. Also, what is most important to them is to be heard, if possible without having to say anything. This phenomenon has to do with the fact that the mouth and spoken word come into their own only on the next higher level of consciousness, the mythical stage. The brain, as instrument of thought, and the eye, as focal point for perspective, are both instruments helping the person on the mental level to stand over against the object and to obtain distance from it.

The thought processes on the magical level can be called *acausal* (cause and effect are not yet born), *analogical*, and *primary process* thinking. They can also be characterized as *syncretic*, *concrete*, *rigid*, and *labile*, in contrast to *discrete*, *abstract*, *flexible*, and *stable* thought operations on the mental level. Behavior on the magical level is *ritualistic*, for there is no will of one's own: things happen to one. The mental level uses *formulae*, *methods*, and *individual will*.

A person on the magical level does not see himself as an individual in his own right, but only as part of his group; hence to be alone is disgraceful, apart from representing nonbeing.

Furthermore, on the magical level of consciousness, the *wish represents reality*, and anything that interferes with the realization of the wish is not to be, hence unreal. He "wills what cannot be willed," yet refuses to accept responsibility for what conceivably he could will. This phenomenon is of crucial importance with reference to working with persons on the magical level, for it is exactly here that communication tends to derail, since to us on the mental level, the wish is unreal and that which resists the wish is considered to be objective reality.

### **Experiences of World, Self, and Other**

Although the person on the magical level of consciousness experiences everything subjectively only, he does not experience himself as having any delineated dimensions. He is either a *mere point* or *omnipresent*. The three-dimensional world, objectivity, and perspective are phenomena that came into being only with the birth of the mental level, sometime in the early Renaissance.

Similarly, there is on the magical level, as yet, no concept of time except the present, which has infinite duration. Hence there is no awareness of what might have led one into one's present state, nor is there any awareness of what the consequences of one's present actions might be later on. Also, what makes one's present suffering so intolerable is primarily the prospect of its going on forever.

Just as with body dimensions and with time, the magical level does not

recognize any measure beyond *all or nothing*, which is one of the reasons for such a person's perpetual difficulties on the interpersonal sphere. Thus, if daughter asks mother to baby-sit for the grandchildren more often than once a week, this presents an insoluble problem for this grandmother who has limited physical resources. She can conceive of saying no if she has a legitimate excuse of being busy elsewhere; but if she does not have such an excuse, she has to say yes: she cannot possibly say, "I'll come on Sunday but I can't come on Thursday too, it would be too much for me."

*Opposites* exist both on the magical and on the mental levels of consciousness. While on the mental level, one attempts to unite both opposites within oneself and to find the natural spot between them, on the magical level one is in identity with one pole of the pair while being inextricably tied to, or at least in search for, the opposite pole. This accounts for a variety of experiential phenomena on this level of consciousness, such as *possessiveness*. In addition, there is the experience of what, on the mental level, we call a *need*, as a *demand*. Any feeling or desire expressed by the other is perceived as a demand on oneself; hence one would prefer not to know what is going on in the other. Any feeling and desire one experiences oneself has to be guarded carefully, because, if voiced, it implies a demand on the other and, if the other should not follow through, a state of utterly frustrated helplessness for oneself. I think that this has to do with the inability to contain both ends of the polarity within oneself. Thus, it is impossible to conceive that one cares for oneself or that the other cares for himself. One is

responsible for the other and the other is responsible for one. This is a crucial, pivotal point necessary to the understanding of the motivations and experiences of a person residing on this level of consciousness. It may explain why some people wait as long as they live for their mothers to finally discharge their responsibilities toward them.

What, on the mental level, we consider to be feeling in the sense of *relationship* or *individual value* and *worth*, does not exist on the magical level. There, its counterpart is *power* and *judgment*. In other words, one cannot allocate one's own worth to oneself, but is subject to evaluation and judgment by others and thus constantly is at the mercy of their power over oneself. Thus, one's value is intricately tied with being needed by the other, with discharging one's obligations toward the other, and being judged favorably by the other.

Similarly, one tends to *judge* others (usually in light of their usefulness to oneself) rather than *feel* for them; of course, the judgment has to remain covert, since overt judgment might elicit retaliative power acts.

Finally, another crucial point derived from what has been said so far: given that one is responsible for the other and not for oneself, one is under constant danger that something might happen to the other for which one is to blame. Hence, there is the constant specter of potential *guilt*, which must at all costs be avoided. Also, one must not take any action on one's own behalf, since this might lead to suffering on the part of the other, and, therefore, arouse intolerable guilt in oneself. Of course, one also tries to alert the other to the guilt he incurs by not taking care of one in the way one wishes him to do.

By now, you must have gained a fairly coherent image of what life on the magical level of consciousness is like—anything but a picnic, though, of course, it does have some rewards, as we shall see later. In order for us to get a more thorough appreciation of what it may be like to find oneself trapped on the magical level, I shall briefly go over some examples of such a person's relationship to the world, to significant others, and to himself. These three categories will of necessity overlap, if for no other reason than that they are really not differentiated on the magical level.

Generally the world is experienced as not being what it should be, for it does not correspond to the wish and idea of what it should be like, namely, perfect. Hence, there is constant discontent with what is, constant judgment of others, of how foolish and inadequate they are. And there is a permanent expectation for them to change. There is no such thing as adaptation to the world, since whatever it is like is not legitimate in one's own eyes. Given that the world does not change simply because we wish it or demand it, the person on the magical level of consciousness lives with a constant feeling of frustration.

On the magical level, being in a state of identity with all non-man-made nature, one suffers all the insults brought upon plant and animal life in his own body and soul. One may take in as many stray critters as one's house can hold, but there are always more outside in the cold, hungry and needy, and one feels responsible for all of them.

People in general and institutions are experienced as being invested with unlimited powers and, accordingly, hostile toward any single being. In relation to them the person on the magical

level sees himself as a mere point, as a target for a multitude of arrows coming from all directions. Although he resents his anonymity, he prefers it in some ways to being recognized and known, for in that case he would present an even larger target for all the arrows aimed at him. Although on one hand he is nothing but a point for hostile forces to aim at, he also experiences himself as unlimited, Godlike, and hence responsible for everything that happens in the world of nature and in the world of humanity.

Given that the world is not what it should be, it interferes constantly with his Godlike omnipotence. This is experienced as a transgression against the Deity, Himself, and is accompanied by the corresponding Yahweh-like wrath. Since no one takes notice of his wrath, it goes on and on and feeds countless fantasies of revenge and self-vindication and alternates with floods of pity for himself. Unfortunately, being Godlike oneself deprives one of the connection with the realm of the transpersonal, of religion. For in order to be open and to be able to perceive the transpersonal powers, one must be aware of the limits of one's strength. But to acknowledge one's limits and to entrust oneself to the other, even if it be a deity, is tantamount to defeat for the person residing on the magical level of consciousness, for there can be, as we know, only he or the other, not both. And perhaps, worse than defeat, acknowledging one's limits may make one prey to ridicule by the other, which is the most dangerous of all. For Yahweh must not ever be laughed at or else he is compelled to destroy the world.

Living in this hostile world, identified with and suffering the pains of nature, the person on the magical level

of consciousness is bound to feel terribly threatened and isolated. And yet, paradoxically, he is not alone at all but, rather, is tied to his significant others by a multitude of dyadic “invisible bonds of loyalty,” as Nagy calls them. These bonds are the bonds of polarity: he is on one pole and the other is on the other pole, and both are inseparably tied together, no matter what the polarity might consist of, and interchangeably so. Thus, if the other comes on as child, the one must be the mother and vice versa. It is out of this polarity relationship, where each presents one pole of the duality and no one both, that the instant transmutation of need into demand must be understood, as well as the consistent stunting of individual feelings. For if one knows that the other will not follow through on one’s demand, there is no point in having a feeling. Thus, almost cryptically, several of my patients, when I asked them how they felt about my impending vacation, told me that I had a right to go away. I think that what they really meant was that they would miss me, but that to miss me would imply a demand that I stay; and since I was going to leave regardless, there was no point in their feeling anything. If you multiply this little incident into the multitude of relationships in which a person is likely to be involved, you can perhaps get a glimpse of the abyss of nothingness that is the only solution to feeling utterly deprived of power. You can also appreciate why it is so difficult to emerge from the magical level of consciousness as long as feeling and need are not differentiated from power and demand. I shall have more to say about this later.

The bond with the other is so concrete that the other is expected to know what one wants without one having to

verbalize it. If the other is deaf to one’s unspoken demand, one is furious or falls into despair. For the other has no existence in his own right, he exists only in relation to oneself. Hence it is also inconceivable that he could have priorities other than oneself.

There is, of course, the other side of the coin: the wish or need on the part of the other, which is experienced as a relentless demand on oneself. This demand from the other is met in one of two ways: either the person gives in to it, without regard to his own priorities, whether he has the strength to do so and the necessary resources, or he does not. As a result he feels used and victimized by the other. Or else he responds to the other’s expressed or implied need with defiance. Both prevent him from going after his own needs. It is impossible for him to say, “No, I am sorry,” or “This is all I can do,” or even not to take the other’s need personally, to be met by himself alone (there is never anyone else who could do it). The only answer to the dilemma is, as he sees it, that the other withhold his demands. And yet, there is no *commitment* to the other, only a sense of relentless *obligation*, for commitment requires the ability for conscious choice, which is not possible for the person on the magical level of consciousness.

As a result of these multiple bondages to others, the person residing on the magical level experiences himself as totally entrapped and permeated with only one wish—freedom. It is a wish to be free *from* his fetters rather than a wish to be free to accomplish a goal. This is problematic, of course, for since he does not know what to do with the freedom, if he had it, he really does not want to let go of his current state. Fromm (1941) and Reich (1965, 1970) have described this dilemma and its

consequences, for society condemns the person as if he had a choice.

There is also the bondage to the inanimate object that is so characteristic of an addictive state, whether it be addiction to food, cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. The mere presence of the object forces one to partake of it until all of it has disappeared. Then there is saturation for a period of time. Then one again feels incomplete without the object and goes in search of it. When one has found it, the vicious cycle starts all over again.

Since the person on the magical level does not feel responsible for himself—for this would imply that both polarities are lodged in his own psyche—he is unable to make a choice, nor can he even conceive of having choices. Instead he feels obligated toward the other and that the other is obligated toward him. His sense of individual worth derives from being needed by the other and from feeling entitled to make claims on him.

On this level of consciousness there is no possibility for dialogue and disagreement, both necessary ingredients for psychological development. The reason for this is that, on the magical level of consciousness, there is only one truth and the person and truth are one. If the other, therefore, ventures to dispute this truth, even if he merely states that he sees it differently, the implication is one of total annihilation of the person himself. Hence it is better not to state one's opinions and at least to avoid anyone who might disagree. Of course, if the other is weaker than oneself, one can simply annihilate the other by wiping the other's viewpoint off the slate.

No step forward can be taken on one's own behalf, since it would induce

guilt about the other's suffering. Also, it might lead the other to do the same, and where would one be then?

The person on the magical level of consciousness does not see himself shaping his own destiny. Things happen to him, not by chance, not because he did not pay attention to warning signs, nor for the sake of imparting meaning; they happen because of the willfulness of others who do things to purposely hurt him or because he is singled out to suffer like no one else on earth. And yet he should not have to suffer; to suffer means being treated unfairly by others and by his own fate. He really should be everlastingly happy and should not have to suffer any change, not even change of seasons. For change is difficult to negotiate; it requires adaptation. Since, however, the other is in possession of one's adaptive skills, one is reminded that he is at the other's mercy without any prospect of change.

If anything goes wrong, it spills over into all areas of his existence and very soon everything goes wrong. He cannot make any long-range plans because he looks at them first from one point of view and then from its opposite: his feelings vacillate and he cannot tell which point of view is the right one.

He is correct there, for the right point of view for him would be what is right for him, but it is exactly this appreciation that is as yet unborn. As a result he is constantly haunted by an urge to arrive at decisions: "What shall I do?" is one of his most frequent utterances. He truly believes that the other holds the answer to his question but is willfully withholding it from him. This is one of the danger points where therapists are likely to be sucked into a magical polarity with their patients, entailing all the consequences therein.

In his personal experience the person on the magical level frequently suffers from functional or organic gastrointestinal disease, which worsens with an increase in rage, often its only overt manifestation. Some will turn to food in order to alleviate the discomfort and also to gain substance to counterbalance their sense of nothingness. Others will turn away from food, since their digestive organs are already filled to the brim with impotent rage.

In addition to the need to be heard, there is a hypersensitivity to selected noises, whether it be hammering of nails by neighbors, someone slurping his soup, or barking of neighborhood dogs. The person on the magical level finds himself utterly invaded and paralyzed by any one of these noises, unable to protect himself from them and, at the same time, unable to take any action with respect to the source of the noise for fear of retaliation. He is nailed to his spot by the noise, as a small animal is frozen by the stare of a snake.

Given that his self perception vacillates between that of being a mere point and of being an omnipresent God, the person residing on this level of consciousness has no clear concept of his personal space. He either finds his territory invaded by others so that he is backed against the wall, no matter how small he tries to make himself, or he finds himself invading other peoples' space. This is perhaps one reason why he experiences group situations as extremely uncomfortable and dangerous. He has no definite space of his own and will panic if exhorted to create such a space (e.g., a bedroom of her own for a married woman whose snoring husband keeps her awake all night), for this would again imply separation and nonbeing.

### **Factors Causing and Contributing to the Magical Level of Consciousness**

By now you must surely experience in your own bones what it must be like to live on the magical level of consciousness day in and day out. Let us now take a quick look at the factors that cause and contribute to this state.

Psychological levels of consciousness can be compared to geological strata that accrue over time. The lower strata do not disappear once higher ones are developed but are simply covered by the higher ones. If one removes the upper layers purposely, or if they become eroded by constant assault of the elements, or if there is an upheaval of the ground due to inner pressure, the lower geological strata will again become apparent. Hence the magical level of consciousness is not pathological as such, nor is the person who functions on this level. Rather, given the fact that our civilization functions on the mental level, the magical level does not equip us to negotiate life to our best advantage.

The magical level is normal for childhood, as well as for the few remaining cultures that have remained isolated from modern-day man. It is normative in relatively closed cultural and family systems within our own society. It becomes problematic only for those who try to straddle the boundaries of the two layers. This is a problem many first-generation Americans have to struggle with throughout their lives.

Although our society supposedly functions on the mental level, this is not true for all aspects of functioning. We are highly advanced in technology and science, but still have far to go in the area of feeling and relationship. Although dignity and worth of self and

others were written down in the Declaration of Independence more than 200 years ago, the incarnation of these ideas is still in process.

The collectivization of our society, the anonymity of the individual in the face of giant institutions, and the rapid change of role relationships in our world all throw the individual back on his own resources. If he is not contained within a loving community, stable family, or meaningful religion, he may find himself entrenched in the magical state, unless he has progressed far enough along the way to his own uniqueness. These social factors may explain why borderline conditions are now more common than several decades ago. Also, the "outer-directedness" of our society implies that one is wrong if one is "inner-directed," which tends to undermine positive development of one's own stance.

If we narrow our focus to the interpersonal sphere of the family, we see that in many contemporary families the parents are unable to properly discharge their parental roles, usually due to past deprivations in their own lives, marital relationships that do not measure up to their fantastic expectations, or both. As a result they pin their hopes and needs on their children, who in turn must serve as parents to these adults. A child who, for whatever reason, is not accorded validation for his own feelings and his individual worth apart from his performance is likely to remain on the magical level of consciousness for a long time. If any attempt on his part to come into his own is met with cries of agony on the part of his mother or father, self-actualization is tantamount to unbearable guilt and must be abandoned, perhaps forever. Also, whenever we are in new interpersonal settings,

which happens so frequently nowadays, and do not know the rules of the game, we may be thrown back onto the magical level of consciousness.

It takes time to accrue an individual point of view and to stand firmly upon it. Nowadays there is so little time and there are so few guidelines. Besides, none of us are able to adapt to the world equally well in all our areas of functioning. Wherever we are poorly adapted, we are likely to have remained on the magical level of consciousness. And often, as Jung frequently pointed out, it is those areas of poor adaptation that throw monkey wrenches into our areas of well-adapted functioning.

There are certain cues that are likely to throw people otherwise fairly well anchored on the mental level of consciousness back onto the magical level, such as ambiguous stimuli, double-bind communications, situations reminiscent of our childhood, or confrontations with authority figures or unruly mobs. Stress, fatigue, illness, change in body surfaces, boredom, and any need for spiritual renewal may erode our hard-won mental level and cause us to revert back to the magical level of consciousness.

Last, and perhaps most important, whenever we are confronted with a problem that life poses, and this happens to everyone of us every so often, and we neglect to deal with it on the mental level of consciousness, it will deal with us on the magical level. The idea that a problem will go away if we ignore it is an illusion.

### **Purpose of the Magical Level**

Let us take a look now at what might be the purpose of the magical level. I think that it is, first of all, a bulwark against slipping back into the

archaic state of nonbeing. However tied into his network of insuperable obligations the person on the magical level might be, he is exerting resistance, he is staking claims; he is asserting himself in some way by identifying with power against a world that he experiences as essentially hostile and uncaring. Since he cannot trust anyone or anything, he must rely on his own powers: he is God and man in one and can prevail by wish, if need be, if no one comes to his assistance in actuality.

Also, given that in his past there has been too little or too inadequate intervention and mediation between him and the powers of outer and inner natural forces, he really is too close to them for comfort. Since he has not learned to relate to the powers via his human limitations, he must meet them on their magical terms.

Another purpose, I believe, of the magical level of consciousness is to bring new life to a dried-up existence. Hence it may suddenly surge up in everyone's personal existence, as well as on the collective level of society, whenever it is time for change and renewal, when the old values have gone stale and the new ones have not yet emerged. Whenever we are involved in the process of creating something new, whether it be pregnancy or a work of art or scientific endeavor, we are likely to find ourselves taken over by the magical state. Thus, we might look at this phenomenon of being both as a necessary means to remain alive and as a necessary means for renewal and creating the new.

### **Implications for Therapeutic Intervention**

Let me now turn to the final part of my paper, the implications of what I

have said so far for therapeutic intervention. The most crucial aspect of therapy is to remain outside the patient's force field while, at the same time, being fully able to appreciate his plight. This is much more easily said than done, for the temptation is great to pick up the helper role they invest us with, or that of mother or judge. The moment we pick up one pole of the polarity, we have lost the game, for the patient remains on the other end, or else he turns the tables on us and we find ourselves in the role of the helpless, inadequate child. Besides, as long as we pick up one pole of the polarity, we preclude the possibility of the patient uniting both poles within himself, which is an essential prerequisite for moving out of the magical sphere.

It is also very difficult not to succumb to the temptation to pick up the other pole because the patient has a way of wearing down our patience and our own self-esteem. If we do venture a suggestion, it is immediately repudiated as nonsensical. We are continually being accused of not being helpful, of not caring, of being pompous, greedy professionals. We are told that we should have the answers but are either too stupid or too coldhearted to share them with this poor soul. If we finally do get angry, the patient blames us for losing our temper and not fulfilling a therapist's role. So, how can we help ourselves in face of this onslaught of accusations and complaints?

First of all, we must put aside all therapeutic ambitions of trying to help the patient to get out of his state; for the harder we try to do so, the more recalcitrant he will become. Second, we must be fully aware of the reality of his state, although it differs from what we

might consider our own reality. Third, if we choose to work with such patients we must make it our serious business to take good care of ourselves in all areas of our existence. We cannot afford to be tired, dyspeptic, upset, or emotionally stale, for any of these would make us more vulnerable to infection by the magical mode. We must look for emotional rewards elsewhere and not expect them from the patient, who is likely to respond with unmitigated rage or withdrawal if he detects any trace of need (ergo, demand) in us.

What if we have already been infected? One way we can try to deal with it is to literally draw a magical circle around ourselves. Another way is to listen to our own magical claims, to look for both poles within ourselves and identify the need and meet it. The more familiar we are with our own magical stratum of consciousness and the more accepting we are of it, the better the chances that we can also be accepting of the patient. Those of us who must keep their distance from their own magical sphere and the raw powers against which it tries to defend itself had better confine their work to patients with strong egos.

Let us assume that we can be relatively impervious to infection by our patients. Are there some modes of intervention that might be more helpful than other modes? I think that there are. Given that the patient on the magical level must be heard and given that he can only recognize oneness, it is important that our individuality remain unobtrusive. Dialogue, often so valuable with other patients, is not encouraged, since any divergence in views is likely to be taken as criticism of himself by the patient in the magical state. Instead, he should be encouraged to

describe his experience. The chances are that he will dwell on a naming of his feelings, such as "I am depressed," or "I feel awful." If at all possible he should be led beyond the name into the image aroused by his feeling. If this can be accomplished, the dyadic tug of war between therapist and patient will have been transformed into the beginning of a therapeutic alliance. Also, the patient will have begun to move from the magical to the mythical sphere. Even if he slips back, which he is likely to do, the image can then again be brought into focus and both therapist and patient can start to speculate about what might happen if one altered this or that in the image.

Also, gently but persistently, the patient should be asked about what preceded his current feeling state, so that eventually he can get the idea that feelings don't usually just happen. He is likely to resist such attempts, since causality is as yet unknown to him. Similarly, one gently needs to draw his attention to possibilities of motivation on the part of the other that may not be connected to him personally, so as to awaken an inkling at least of the other's existence in his own right.

Most important, perhaps, is that we, as well as the patient, not try to get him out of his predicament. Trying to get out of a state means trying to withdraw energy from it with a resulting tightening of the knots. What is needed is the opposite: warm illumination, loving attention until enough energy accrues to cause the jump into the next mutation of consciousness. Mutations of consciousness occur in a process that may be similar to cell division. One does not make a cell divide. But if one furnishes enough energy to the nucleus, it will lead into division of the cell.

I think that this concept of spontaneous mutation of consciousness from one level to the next will also help us not to become too impatient if nothing seems to change over a long period of time. Nothing does change until a new vantage point has been attained.

Last but not least, even though the patient's frame of mind is likely to be totally different from ours, we must acknowledge to him, in whatever way we can, the reality of his experience (it helps, therefore, if we are conversant with the magical phase) and his worth as a human being in spite of the image he has of himself. The chances are that no one has acknowledged him to date for where and who he is, including himself. In time, hopefully, an individual value will emerge that can then serve as the thread in the solution around which the crystals of the patient's future life can take form.

In this paper I have attempted to describe what it is like to work with patients who are on the magical level of consciousness, what it is like to exist on that level, its causes and functions, and some possible ways of intervening with this state in a therapeutic encounter.

## Notes

- 1) A paper presented at the South Beach Psychiatric Center, General Staff Meeting, March 10, 1976.
- 2) Gebser speaks of five levels of consciousness: archaic, magical, mythical, mental, and integral. Their characteristics range from the unconsciousness of the archaic level to the individuated consciousness of the integral level. In our world of radical changes, stresses, and free-floating energies, ego development toward the mental and integral levels is all too frequently stalled at the magical level.

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