

On the Nature of Superstition

A superstition, in what follows, is a false belief based on fear or ignorance (or both), that contradicts the known laws of science or what is considered by society, in general, to be true and rational; it is in particular, such a credulous belief in signs, omens, and jinxes within the natural world. What, then, is the “nature” of superstition? These three beliefs above are correlated in a sense that they all are part of a complex of peculiar attitudes and feelings surrounding the activity of superstition. A sign is something that is believed to indicate a fact; an omen is the occurrence of such a sign, or signs, believed to predict a future event, either good or bad; and a jinx is a person or thing believed to bring about bad luck. Thus, what all three of the above share in common is that they all are believed; therefore, what is believed to be real is a result of what is perceived to be real.

Superstitious belief, though, comes about through normal behaviors that evolve into abnormal beliefs; for, each person follows certain patterns: routine becomes habit, and habit becomes ritual; and it is the necessity of a person to perform routine, habit, and ritual out of a fear of misfortune that spawns superstition. It is apparent, then, that fear causes superstition; and it is evident that this fear is a result of ignorance; that is, this fear comes from a lack of knowledge, and it is this lack of awareness that leads to a person’s misperception of reality that which, in the end, becomes only a false belief. That a well-informed and knowledgeable person can be superstitious, though, is a paradox. Dostoevsky’s anonymous hero in his *Notes from Underground* is aware of this contradiction: “I am extremely superstitious... (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious).” I, too, am in a sense such an absurd and existential character in everyday life. Thus, I will use my personal experience as a practical account of the irrational thoughts and actions that lead to, and perpetuate superstition.

It seems that even though I am clearly aware there is no such thing as a sign, jinx, or omen –even in light of this evident awareness, I still perform routines, habits, and rituals for reasons I know are the result of a superstition; and for this reason, I consider my beliefs to be a result of superstitious agnosticism: I feel that although there is no evidence to substantiate my superstitions (as the evidence is unsound), there is still no need to risk taking a chance that my superstitious beliefs might well be true.

Superstition is a precautionary step toward dealing with uncertainty. I feel that I am thus taking proactive steps through the use of superstition, but this is not the case. As an example of precautionary vs. proactive measures, let us look at the ritual of the washing of hands. I wash my hands –as I feel all people should –I wash my hands after I go to the bathroom, before and after I handle food, etc. People develop the routine of washing their hands and then, later on, they wash them out of habit because they learned to do so for fear of getting ill from germs. The fact that germs cannot be seen, though,

helps to perpetuate a false belief in children of contracting cuddies; for, children learn from other children that, like germs, one can be infected with cuddies even if cuddies can't be seen (nor is it ever known that one in fact has cuddies); and so a pattern of avoidance of this danger arises. And even though, later, as adults we become aware of the truth that there is no such thing as cuddies, we still have a problem with invisible dangers.

Routine, habit, and ritual are in fact a proactive approach to dealing with many uncertain outcomes of various situations in life. An example of this can be found in the washing of hands. I am in the routine of washing my hands after the handling of chicken so as not to contract salmonella; and this is a rational fear. The result of washing my hands then is, in this case, a proactive way of dealing with a real and true danger. Therefore, I develop a habit as a result of this fear and also then wash my hands after being in public places and touching such things as door knobs, which I reason have germs spread by other people in the same way that salmonella spreads from chicken. Further, I also have the habit of washing my hands at home after touching things similar to the door knobs above, even though it is not possible for these things to have the germs of strangers on them, as my wife and I are the only ones in the home. But this is an irrational fear; although it seems to be a proactive approach to avoid illness, it is in fact a precaution taken as a result of a false belief and thereby a superstition.

Signs, jinxes, and omens are a precautionary approach to dealing with the uncertain outcomes of situations in life, too. Signs grow to become superstitious beliefs in a synonymous way the washing of hands described above evolves from a proactive prevention to a superstitious precaution. A sign is something reasoned to indicate a fact: for example, dark clouds and high winds are a sign of a thunderstorm; and this is sound reasoning. Though one's reasoning is unsound in the case of superstition. For example, a superstitious person believes a lunar eclipse is a sign of the end of the earth.

But this is a specious logic; for, although the earth will certainly end someday (as do all things in this world) –It is true that the earth will end eventually, but lunar eclipses are only a sign of the continued cycling of the earth and the moon around the sun. Therefore, a lunar eclipse doesn't in fact cause anything bad to happen on earth: a lunar eclipse is simply the result of a shadow cast on the moon by the earth. Thus, the interpretation of events such as a lunar eclipse being a sign of the end of the earth is an example of an omen, as it is founded on the belief that something bad will happen as a result of this occurrence. On the other hand, a penny found heads up is believed to be a good omen; whereas, a black cat crossing one's path is believed to be a bad omen. The black cat also is thought to be a jinx, as it is believed to be a sign of bad luck to come. Though, the belief in the good luck of the penny, is as much a false logic as in that the belief of the bad luck of a black cat; for, a penny found lying heads up is just a result of chance, and an encounter of a black cat crossing one's path is just a common

coincidence. The point is that there are countless reasons why people believe in particular superstitions, as the actual truth of the matter is that all superstitions are merely false beliefs.

Superstition is one of the most common ailments of society: fear and ignorance fuel it, and like prejudice, it feeds on ignorance and is quite contagious. It is not a psychical contagion but rather a disease of the individual mind. Unrestrained, it can spread by word of mouth to other individuals, from one person to the next fear of the unknown is passed along as well as “a false conception of causality; an irrational and abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural” as a result of this superstition; and last, it is “a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary.” And this is the definition of superstition in our examination here.

Superstition is in the simple state of its nature an idea that is believed to be true, but is in reality false. Another way to say it is that superstition is an idea that is believed to be true, but is in truth, false. And yet another way to say it is that superstition is an idea that is believed to be true, but is in fact, false. Therefore, it would appear that the things we are looking at are reality, truth, and facts, but it is actuality that we are looking at: superstition is something that is believed to be true, but is in actuality false. But superstition is more than this, also. It is the idea in our culture, namely, that numbers mean something. Is it true that numbers have a meaning? Do things happen a certain number of times, such as how many times you encounter a stoplight that is red on the way home from the grocery store? And if so, do these things happen for a reason, which would give them meaning?

Happenstance is oftentimes interpreted as fact, truth, and reality, when it is in actuality just random chance encounters with things caused by the forces of nature in the universe. An example of this is: a penny found tails side up is considered bad luck, when in actuality it is that a person dropped it by chance, and the penny fell and landed as it did according to mathematics of gravity, and no ‘luck’ is involved. One can gain no fortune by the chance of a penny heads side up, yet this idea is so ingrained into our culture that it is ‘believed’ to be true.

Anthropology, specifically the Thomas Theorem, states that what is believed to be real is real in its consequences. This means that if one believes strongly enough that one is possessed by a demon, it will show in its, the belief, effect and affect; it will show in its effect by causing the person to act 'demon possessed,' and it will show in the person's mental effect on their physical appearance. But the belief in the luck of the penny merely affords one to attribute good fortune to its being head side up, and to attribute bad fortune to its being heads side down. For instance, if I find a penny 'on heads,' and I pick it up and I get a phone call from a friend saying that they are coming into town and are going to pay me a visit after a long period of absence, this might seem as if, with the belief in the good penny, -it might seem to the superstitious person that a.) The good penny was an omen of fortune, and b.) the visit from the friend was, if not a result of finding the good penny, -it was at least somehow at least associated with the two co-occurring events. But in actuality, the two events are unrelated, and finding the penny means nothing except that somehow someone either discarded, misplaced, or lost the penny; and, too, the only fortune that might be said of this event is that a.) one is a penny richer (good), or b.) one is a penny poorer (bad) (because one thought the bad penny was bad luck and didn't pick it up).