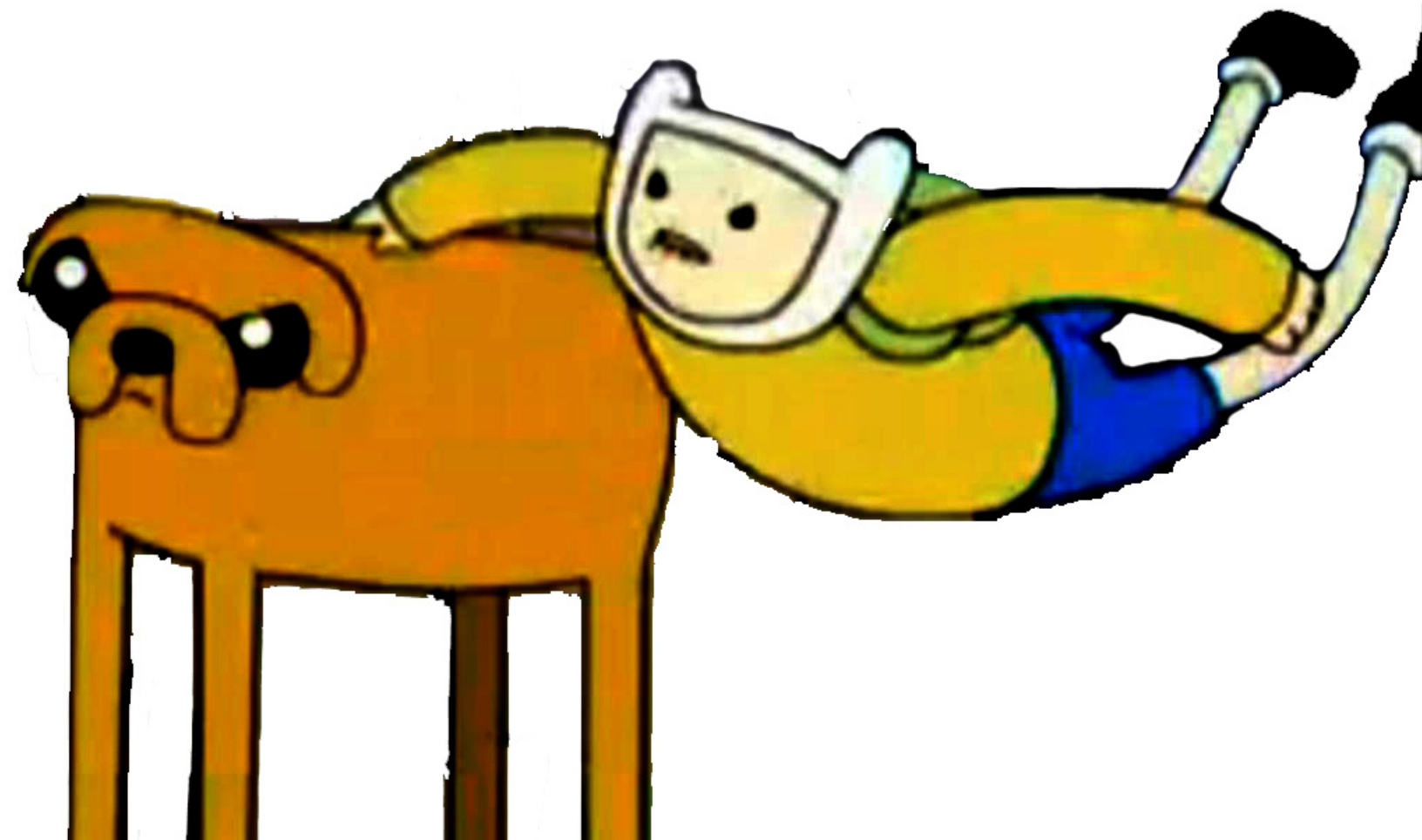


magic and

happiness



Giorgio Agamben

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s h o u t o u t s
hippohouse(rip?),thespace,hollowpoint,nhl99,
midatlantic,mariotennis,somedelinquents,
j-ham,doggy/neu,keip,phaze,rhaze,etc

Walter Benjamin once said that a child's first experience of the world is not his realization that "adults are stronger but rather that he cannot make magic," The statement was made under the influence of a twenty-milligram dose of mescaline, but that does not make it any less salient. It is, in fact, quite likely that the invincible sadness that sometimes overwhelms children is born precisely of their awareness that they are incapable of magic. What ever we can achieve through merit and effort, cannot make us truly happy. Only magic can do that. This did not escape the childlike genius of Mozart, who clearly indicated the secret solidarity between magic and happiness in a letter to Jopseph Bullinger: "To live respectably and to live happily are two very different things, the latter will not be possible for me without some kind of magic; for this something truly supernatural would have to happen."

Like creatures in fables, children know that in order to be happy it is necessary to keep the genie in the bottle at one's side, and have the donkey that craps gold coins or the hen that lays golden eggs in one's house. And no matter what the situation, it is much more important to know the exact place and the right words to say than to take the trouble to reach a goal

by honest means. Magic means that precisely no one can be worthy of happiness and that, as the ancients knew, any happiness commensurate with man is always hubris; it is always the result of arrogance and excess. But if someone succeeds in influencing fortune through trickery, if happiness depends not on what one is but on a magic walnut or an “Open sesame!” — then and only then can one consider oneself to be truly and blessedly happy.

This childlike wisdom affirms that happiness is not something that can be deserved, has always been met with the objections of official morality. Take the words of Kant, the philosopher who was least capable of capable of understanding the difference between living with dignity and living happily: “That in you which strives towards happiness is inclination, that which then limits this inclination to the condition of your first being worthy of happiness is your reason.” But we (or the child within us) wouldn’t know what to do with happiness of which we were worthy. What a disaster if a woman loved you because you deserved it! And how boring to receive happiness as the reward of work well done.

That the bond linking magic and happiness is not simply immoral, that it can indeed testify to a higher ethics, is shown in the ancient maxim that whoever realizes he is happy has already ceased to be so. This means that happiness has a paradoxical relationship with its subject. Someone who is happy cannot know that he is; the subject of happiness is not a subject per se and does not obtain the form of consciousness or of a conscience, not even a good one. Here magic appears as an exception, the only one that allows someone to be happy and to know that he is. Whoever enjoys something through en-

enchantment escapes from the hubris implicit in the consciousness of happiness, since, in a certain sense, the happiness that he knows he possesses is not his. Thus when Zeus assumes the likeness of Amphitryon and unites with beautiful Alcmene, he does not enjoy her as Zeus, nor even despite his appearances, as Amphitryon. His enjoyment lies entirely in enchantment, and only what has been obtained through the crooked paths of magic can be enjoyed consciously and purely. Only someone who is enchanted can say “I” with a smile, and the only happiness that is truly deserved is the one we could never dream of deserving.

That is the ultimate reason for the precept that there is only one way to achieve happiness on this earth: to believe in the divine and not to aspire to reach it (there is an ironic variation of this in a conversation between Franz Kafka and Gustav Janouch, when Kafka affirms that there is plenty of hope— but not for us). This apparently ascetic thesis becomes intelligible only if we understand the meaning of this “not for us.” It means not that happiness is reserved only for others (happiness is precisely, for us) but that it awaits only at the point where it was not destined for us. That is: happiness can be ours only through magic. At that point, when we have wrenched it away from fate, happiness coincides entirely with our knowing ourselves to be capable of magic, with the gesture we use to banish that childhood sadness once and for all.

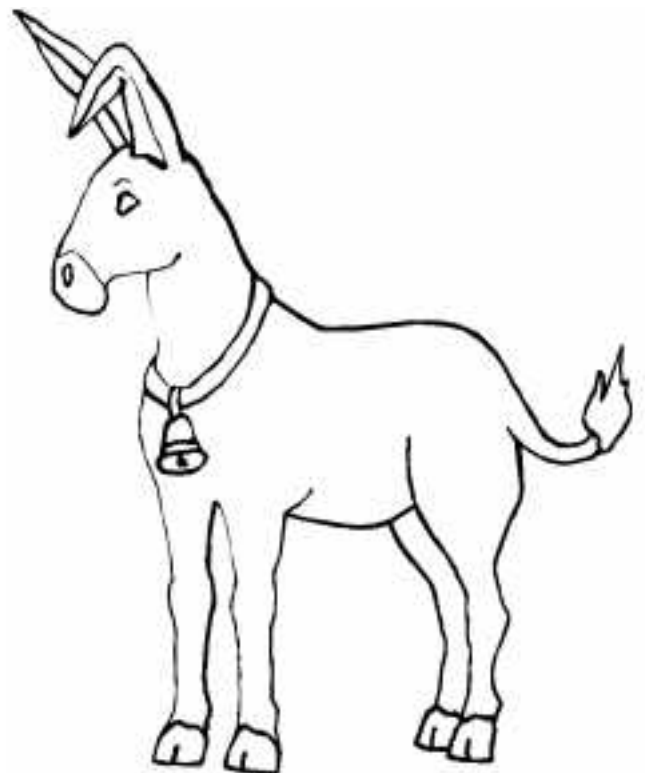
If this is so, there is no other happiness than feeling capable of magic, then Kafka’s enigmatic definition of magic becomes clear. He writes that if we call life by its right name, it comes forth, because “that is the essence of magic, which does not

create but summons.” This definition agrees with the ancient tradition scrupulously followed by kabbalists and necromancers, according to which magic is essentially a science of secret names. Each thing, each being, has in addition to its manifest name, another, hidden name to which it cannot fail to respond. To be a magus means to know and evoke these archi-names. Hence the interminable discussions of names (diabolical or angelic) through which the necromancer ensures his mastery over spiritual powers. For him, the secret name is the only seal of his power of life and death over the creature that bears it.

But according to another, more luminous tradition, the secret name is not so much a cipher of the thing’s subservience to the magus’s speech as, rather, the monogram that sanctions its liberation from language. The secret name was a name by which the creature was called in Eden. When it is pronounced, every manifest name—the entire Babel of names—is shattered. That is why, according to the doctrine, magic is a call to happiness. The secret name is a gesture that restores the creature to the unexpressed. In the final instance, magic is not a knowledge of names but a gesture, a breaking free from the name. That is why a child is never more content than when he invents a secret language. His sadness comes less from ignorance of magic names than from his own ability to free himself from the name that has been imposed on him. No sooner does he succeed, no sooner does he invent a new name, than he holds in his hands the *laissez-passer* that grants him happiness. To have a name is to be guilty. And justice, like magic, is nameless. Happy, and without a name, the creature knocks at the gates of the land of the magi, who speaks in gestures alone.



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