

Mormonism and Misdirection

What Magic Can Teach Us About Mormonism

bob mccue

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Illusion is the first of all pleasures. Oscar Wilde

Introduction

Humans tend to consistently misperceive certain types of phenomena. Theories abound as to why this is the case. Rather than explore those, I want in this essay to look at a type of misperception that has been exploited by magicians – misdirection – and ask what this can teach us about how Mormonism and other social phenomena function in our lives.

Time and Misdirection

There is only so much time. If a large percentage of a person's discretionary time is devoted to Mormon activities, there will be little chance to place life in a broad perspective and hence see Mormonism in context so that one might question whether it is what it purports to be.

This is a classic magician's trick called "misdirection". See <http://www.leirpoll.com/misdirection/misdirection.htm>. As the legendary magician Jean Hugard said,

"The principle of misdirection plays such an important role in magic that one might say that Magic is misdirection and misdirection is Magic".

That is, magic is performed by the magician using tendencies in human perception to make us look at his left hand while his right hand (or foot, or assistant, etc.) does something that we do not notice and gives the impression that magic has occurred.

One of my favourite magic tricks (and one of the few that is simple enough for me to do) is performed as follows:

- A group of people is seated in chairs and watching the trick.
- I put my hands in front of the subject's face, and about a foot away from her nose.
- I show her a handkerchief with my left hand, and then while moving my hands around each other in a circular manner that is supposed to look confusing but not be confusing, I stuff the handkerchief into my closed right fist so that an edge is still visible.
- While doing so, I close my left hand into an identical fist.
- I then ask her where the handkerchief is.

- She points to my right hand.
- I repeat this procedure twice.
- Each time the subject easily spots the handkerchief.
- Then, having defined the “relevant space” and “relevant actions” for my subject, I know that her attention will be focused on the area around my hands in front of her and on what my hands have done the past three times.
- So, this time as I move my hands in precisely the circular motion I have trained her to watch, I release the handkerchief from my left hand so that it flies quickly over her head.

The flight of the handkerchief is obvious to everyone else in the room because they stand at a distance from the action that allows them to see the handkerchief as it hangs in the air for a second and falls to the floor. That is, their perspective enables them to avoid the “misdirection” that tricks the subject.

However, the subject only has the chance to see the handkerchief as it moves about 12 inches before passing out of her field of vision, and she is focused on the area a few inches around my hands. While the human eye is quick enough to pick motion of this sort up, when “misdirected” it will not do so. The subject looks foolish when she assumes that the handkerchief is in the right hand again, and is amazed when it is not in either hand.

Social Groups and Misdirection

Mormons have their attention so focussed on the minutiae and ritual of life within the Mormon community that they are in the position of the subject in my trick. Handkerchiefs of all kinds are flying right and left over their heads without them being able to see them. But of course, those who are not so involved in Mormonism – who stand at a distance – can see what is going on and react a little like those who watch my trick my subject with the handkerchief.

But then the table turn. Mormons can look at many of those who laugh at them (some Evangelical Christians, for example, who believe that the Earth is 6,000 to 10,000 years old and Noah really did get all those animals into the Ark, etc.) and see hankies galore flying around that are invisible to other people.

While this may belabour the point, I think I should outline one more “misdirection” experiment. The point here is that misdirection in magic is based on based weaknesses in the human ability to perceive that psychologists and neuroscientists now study. My favourite object lesson in this regard can be found on the Internet (see <http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/grafs/demos/15.html>, if you have a java enabled computer). It is a video clip of people passing a couple of basketballs between them. Five (I think) people are dressed in relatively light coloured clothes, are walking in a complicated pattern and are passing two light coloured balls between them.

If you can access this video, you may as well perform the experiment on yourself. So before reading further, watch the video and count the number of times the balls moves from one person to another. This is not easy to do because of the way they move in front of each other while passing the balls around.

After this short video ends (maybe 30 seconds) you are asked if you noticed anything "odd". I didn't. "You didn't see the gorilla?" you are asked. "Nope" was my response. So you replay the video.

While the people are walking through their pattern and passing the ball, a man dressed in a black gorilla suit walks into the middle of the group, turns toward the camera, beats his chest and makes a face, and then walks out of the frame. It is that obvious. And I did not see it because I was focused on who was passing the ball to whom, and the gorilla was dressed like the background (dark) instead of the figures (light). But once you knew that something "odd" had happened and paid close attention, this was as obvious as the computer sitting right now on the desk in front of me. It was "magical" when the gorilla appeared out of thin air.

Such is the power of misdirection. And it is far from just a religious phenomena. It applies to politics, economics, social relationships of all kinds, etc. It is one of those fundamentally important things to grasp if one wishes to understand as much as possible of human behaviour, both individual and social.

To show how deep this runs, consider the unsettling story of how progress sets traps that destroy entire civilizations is really about the human tendency to focus on social fine points (like how quickly our economy is growing) while missing critical big picture imperatives (like global warming). Jared Diamond tells this story in "Collapse" (see http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/?050103crbo_books and <http://www.davidbrin.com/collapse.html>) . For a shorter and much more accessible (if darker) version of the same events, see Robert Wright's "A Short History of Progress" (see <http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2005/03/23.html>).

Conclusion

So, if we are sufficiently focused on the minutiae of living a Mormon life, the big picture will not be questioned. Hence, Mormonism (and many other religions that use the same system) are all about the details, routine and ritual of daily living, and result in such a busy day to day existence that there is little opportunity to think about where the train is headed.

This is not the result of the plan of some evil men sitting around in the Salt Lake Temple. Rather, this is how human social organizations of all types to some extent function, as already noted. They spontaneously organize to protect themselves, find the resources they need to flourish, etc. The reason that the rules of modern democracies are so important is that they run against the hierarchical grain of human groups, and so force human organizations in an unnatural direction. This requires leaders to account to members; this restrains the natural direction of hierarchical power; this requires information about how and why leadership decisions are made to be disclosed to the members. Perhaps the clearest lesson from human history is that absent the constraints that democracy imposes on the power of those at the top of the social pyramid, power will be abused.

So, if you want to find out where your blind spots are, you have no choice but to seek the help of others whose perspective differs from your own. And those who cling to the belief that they are uniquely capable of assessing truth and so refuse the help of others will be forever blind in some ways.

And, watch out for those gorillas.