

EVIL EYE?

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EVIL EYE

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1. Core Definition

The **Evil Eye** (Latin: *oculus malus*; Greek: *baskania*; Arabic: *ayn al-hasad*) is a pervasive and ancient folk belief centered on the notion that a malevolent gaze, intentional or otherwise, can inflict harm, misfortune, illness, or even death upon the recipient. This hostile stare is fundamentally rooted in the powerful human emotion of **envy**. The belief system posits that when an individual possesses something desirable--such as wealth, beauty, success, or health--that possession attracts the covetous gaze of others. It is not necessarily the physical act of staring that causes the harm, but the destructive psychic energy or malicious intent transmitted through the eye, which acts as a conduit for negative spiritual forces or supernatural ill will.

The consequences attributed to the Evil Eye are remarkably consistent across disparate cultures, ranging from mild annoyances to severe catastrophes. Typical effects include sudden, inexplicable illness, especially in infants and young children; failure of livestock or crops; financial ruin; breakage of objects; and general malaise or bad luck. The belief system acts as a potent mechanism for explaining arbitrary misfortune that lacks a clear, discernible cause. It offers a framework within which victims can attribute their suffering to external, personal malice rather than random chance or internal fault, thereby restoring a measure of psychological control over unpredictable, chaotic events in their lives.

Distinguishing the Evil Eye from other forms of magic or curses is crucial for understanding its social function. While a curse usually requires a deliberate, ritualized act by a sorcerer, the Evil Eye often requires no conscious intention. The destructive power can be inherent in the gazer, sometimes without their knowledge or consent, activated merely by their intense admiration, desire, or, most commonly, their simmering jealousy. This distinction highlights the societal function of the belief: it regulates social interaction, particularly discouraging boastfulness or excessive display of prosperity, as these actions are believed to attract the envious gaze and subsequent supernatural damage, reinforcing social equality.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The belief in the malevolent power of the gaze is one of the most enduring and geographically widespread superstitions in human history, tracing its roots back to the dawn of recorded civilization. Evidence of apotropaic (evil-averting) talismans and written references to the Evil Eye appear prominently in the literature and artifacts of **ancient Sumer** and **Ancient Egypt**, suggesting a deep antiquity dating back millennia. In Mesopotamia, protective charms were often worn, and

spells were recited to neutralize the effects of the envious look. The concept was also deeply integrated into classical antiquity, particularly within the Greek and Roman worlds, where it was known respectively as *baskania* and *fascinum*, reflecting pervasive anxiety about social standing and sudden reversal of fortune.

The philosophy and science of the ancient world attempted to rationalize the phenomenon, treating it not merely as superstition but as a quasi-physical reality. Scholars and physicians in antiquity believed the eye physically emitted rays or some form of effluvium that could poison or harm the object of the gaze. Plutarch, the Greek essayist, extensively discussed the Evil Eye, postulating that it was most dangerous when the gazer was particularly corrupted or possessed a destructive emotional state. This early rationalization provided a foundational, pseudo-scientific basis for the supernatural effect, lending credibility to the folklore and ensuring its continued transmission through philosophical and medical texts well into the medieval period.

As major world religions spread, the belief persisted, often integrated or slightly modified to fit within new theological frameworks rather than being eradicated. In Islam, the concept of *ayn al-hasad* (the eye of envy) is explicitly recognized in Hadith literature, and specific protective prayers (such as those against *hasad*, or envy) are used for protection. Similarly, in Judaism and Christianity, while not always central dogma, the superstition remains robust in folk traditions, particularly in Mediterranean, Eastern European, and diasporic communities. This enduring resilience across diverse religious and geographical landscapes underscores its fundamental role in regulating human interaction and managing deep-seated anxieties about prosperity, sudden loss, and social stability.

3. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms

The Involuntary Nature of the Gaze: A key characteristic differentiating the Evil Eye from witchcraft is its potential to be cast unintentionally. In many traditions, individuals who possess strikingly unusual physical traits, such as those with highly penetrating or heterochromatic eyes, or those with rare eye colors (like blue or green in populations where these are uncommon), are sometimes believed to possess the power naturally, even if they harbor no ill will. This characteristic complicates social dynamics, as the potentially harmful gaze is not limited to known enemies but can emanate from friends, relatives, or even the gazer themselves via self-admiration.

Vulnerability of the Prosperous and the Helpless: The belief is consistently directed towards those who stand out--the successful, the beautiful, the recently fortunate, and those who are inherently powerless. The most vulnerable targets are universally recognized: infants, pregnant women, domestic animals, and new, expensive possessions (such as houses or vehicles). The belief system thus emphasizes the precariousness of good fortune and the immediate danger of displaying success, suggesting that true safety lies in modesty and anonymity, thereby discouraging ostentation.

Mechanism of Action (Depletion and Withering): The mechanism of harm is often conceived as a draining or sucking action. The gaze is thought to actively deplete the victim's vitality, health, or luck, leaving them weakened or afflicted with a slow decline. This concept of depletion explains why symptoms are typically vague physical ailments like chronic fatigue, loss of appetite, persistent bad luck, or the sudden withering of plants or livestock, rather than severe, localized trauma. The energy of the gaze is seen as fundamentally corrosive and exhaustive.

The Danger of Excessive Praise (Praise-Dread): A specific and critical characteristic in many Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures is the profound danger associated with excessive or unqualified praise. Praising someone without immediately adding a neutralizing, culturally prescribed phrase (such as "Masha'Allah" in Arabic, meaning "What God has willed," or "God bless it") is considered tantamount to casting the Evil Eye. This is because the praise itself draws the envious attention of supernatural forces or the gazer's own unconscious envy, alerting the universe to the victim's vulnerable prosperity.

4. Geographical and Cultural Manifestations

The geographical reach of the Evil Eye belief is truly global, encompassing the vast majority of the world's population throughout history, though it remains most intensely active in the Mediterranean Basin, the Middle East, South Asia, East Africa, and Latin America. In each region, the belief adapts to local anxieties and incorporates indigenous symbolism and social hierarchies.

In Turkey and Greece, the ubiquitous blue glass amulet known as the **Nazar** is the most common and recognizable form of protection. These charms, which often resemble an eye themselves, function on the principle of sympathetic magic: they stare back at the envious gaze, absorbing the negative energy or reflecting it away before it can reach the intended target. They are commonly displayed on homes, vehicles, places of business, and are worn extensively as jewelry, demonstrating a continuous, proactive attempt to neutralize potential envy in public and private spheres.

In Italy, particularly in the South, the Evil Eye is known as *malocchio*. Protection frequently involves making a specific hand gesture known as the *corona* (the horns)--a fist with the index and little fingers extended--or wearing the **cornicello** amulet, a horn-shaped charm derived from ancient fertility symbols. Here, the emphasis is often placed on the deliberate, malevolent use of the Evil Eye by specific individuals known to possess the power, often referred to as *jettatore*, who are socially feared and often avoided due to their inherent, unlucky influence.

Across the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America, the belief is pervasive, often referred to as *mal de ojo*. Symptoms in infants--such as uncontrollable crying, fever, and refusal to eat--are quickly attributed to the *mal de ojo*, requiring immediate intervention. Remedies often involve ritual cleansing by a local healer or the use of protective bracelets, particularly those featuring red string

or beads, sometimes incorporating the seed of the *ojo de venado* (deer's eye), which are thought to divert the gaze from the vulnerable child. These regional variations demonstrate the deep integration of the belief into daily routines, preventative care, and folk healing practices.

5. Psychological and Sociological Functions

From a sociological perspective, the Evil Eye serves as a powerful, albeit supernatural, mechanism of social control, particularly in communities where resources are perceived as scarce or social mobility is restricted. Anthropologist George Foster famously categorized the Evil Eye belief within the concept of the **Image of Limited Good**, where all desirable things (wealth, health, and love) are perceived as finite, unexpandable resources. If one person gains an abundance of good, it must necessarily come at the expense of others. In this environment, conspicuous displays of success are viewed as both greedy and dangerously provocative, inviting social censure and, symbolically, the destructive curse of the eye.

The belief system rigorously enforces conformity, modesty, and resource sharing. An individual who experiences sudden or sustained prosperity is culturally obligated to downplay their success, practice humility, and share their good fortune through generosity (e.g., feasts, gifts) to preempt the envy of others. If they fail to adhere to these norms, and subsequently suffer a misfortune (e.g., losing livestock, failing a harvest, or falling seriously ill), the community attributes the setback to the Evil Eye--a supernatural punishment for violating crucial social norms regarding humility and resource hoarding. This functions to maintain horizontal relationships and to redistribute psychological and sometimes material wealth within the community structure, ensuring social equilibrium.

Psychologically, the Evil Eye offers a culturally sanctioned, externalized explanation for personal failure or affliction, which can be immensely comforting. For the victim, knowing that their suffering is caused by external malice (even if unintentional) can be less psychologically devastating than attributing it to internal incompetence, moral failing, or random, meaningless catastrophe. It provides a means of labeling and managing diffuse anxiety, transforming vague fears into a concrete, though supernatural, threat that can then be countered with specific rituals and tangible amulets. Furthermore, the belief channels potentially destructive feelings of envy--which are universally experienced--into a predictable, ritualized threat, rather than allowing them to erupt into direct interpersonal conflict, thus acting as a pressure valve for societal resentment.

6. Amulets and Countermeasures

The universality of the Evil Eye belief is mirrored by the sheer variety and universality of protective measures designed to ward off or neutralize the harmful gaze. These countermeasures fall generally into three operational categories: apotropaic devices, symbolic gestures, and cleansing

rituals, all predicated on the idea of diverting the gaze or reversing the flow of malevolent energy.

Apotropaic Devices: These are physical objects specifically designed to avert or reflect the gaze. The most effective devices are those that either visually resemble an eye (like the Turkish **Nazar** or the Hamsa hand with an eye in the center) or possess a startling, distracting quality. The underlying principle is that the charm intercepts the initial hostile glance, protecting the wearer. Other common amulets include red ribbons or strings (believed to attract the initial gaze and absorb the impact), and objects associated with fertility or sexuality, such as horns or phallic symbols (e.g., the Italian *cornicello*), which are used to shock the viewer or divert their attention from the intended target through crude or unexpected imagery.

Gestures and Rituals: Immediate physical gestures are often employed when one suspects being gazed upon by an envious person. These range from the symbolic--such as spitting (or pretending to spit) three times over the shoulder to neutralize the gaze--to specific hand formations, such as the *corona* gesture in Italy or forming a fist with the thumb tucked between the index and middle fingers (the fig sign) in other regions. Rituals are frequently used after the harm has been done to diagnose and cure the victim. A common divinatory ritual involves dropping oil into water; the way the oil disperses, sinks, or forms bubbles dictates whether the Evil Eye is present, and specific incantations, prayers, or blessings are then used to draw the negative energy out of the afflicted person and into a sacrificial object.

7. Significance and Impact

The significance of the Evil Eye extends far beyond mere superstition; it profoundly influences social behavior, economics, and even architecture in cultures where it is strongly held. For example, in parts of the Mediterranean and Middle East, construction traditions sometimes dictate that houses are deliberately left slightly unfinished or built with minor, visible flaws to avoid attracting the gaze of the envious by signaling that the owners are not excessively wealthy, perfect, or boastful. In commerce, prices for highly prized goods may be negotiated privately to avoid public displays of transaction success that could attract envy.

In the contemporary world, the belief persists robustly despite modernization, urbanization, and increased formal education. While highly educated individuals may dismiss the supernatural aspect of the belief, they often continue to use protective charms or observe customs (like refraining from boasting about a new achievement on social media) as pragmatic, precautionary measures. They view these practices perhaps as harmless cultural heritage, or simply as effective methods to manage generalized anxiety about bad luck and external threats, maintaining a behavioral deference to the tradition. The continued widespread commercial viability and adoption of protective jewelry and home decor demonstrates its enduring cultural and economic impact globally.

Furthermore, the concept holds critical significance in cultural psychology as a classic example of a **culture-bound syndrome** or folk illness. The symptoms attributed to the Evil Eye (fatigue, loss of success, non-specific illness) are real experiences of subjective distress that are organized and interpreted by the cultural schema, offering practitioners and lay healers a coherent framework for diagnosis and treatment that is locally meaningful and socially validated, often proving highly effective in providing symptomatic relief within that cultural context.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Academic and scientific criticism of the Evil Eye revolves primarily around its lack of empirical support and its categorization as a sociological rather than a medical or physically verifiable phenomenon. Skeptics argue that the Evil Eye belief is a classic example of the **post hoc ergo propter hoc** fallacy: when misfortune inevitably strikes, the coincidence of a recent envious gaze or display of success is retroactively seized upon as the supernatural cause, effectively creating a powerful, pervasive, and self-fulfilling belief system that reinforces its own logic through selective memory of negative outcomes.

Western psychology tends to interpret the physical symptoms attributed to the Evil Eye as manifestations of psychosomatic illness, high levels of stress, or generalized anxiety disorder, filtered and expressed through cultural expectations. The relief experienced by victims following healing rituals or the wearing of amulets is often explained through the **placebo effect**, where the ritualized belief in the cure provides genuine psychological comfort, reduces somatic anxiety, and consequently leads to reported physical symptom relief, highlighting the power of cognitive framing in health outcomes.

Despite these rational, reductionist critiques, cultural anthropologists insist that the validity of the belief lies not in its physical reality but in its potent social efficacy and functional role. The Evil Eye is recognized as a vital element of social ecology, providing a necessary and controlled outlet for the human emotion of envy and acting as a powerful deterrent against socially destabilizing behaviors like extreme individualism and excessive materialism, thereby reinforcing group cohesion, normative humility, and equitable social dynamics in traditional and closely-knit societies.

9. Further Reading

[Evil Eye \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Envy \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Nazar \(Amulet\)](#)

[Image of Limited Good](#)

[Culture-Bound Syndrome](#)