Remarks on Wittgenstein's Remarks on Frazer

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The following essay was prepared for the volume "The Mythology in Our Language"*—an anthropological response to Wittgenstein's famous critical commentaries on Sir James Frazer's* The Golden Bough*, edited by Giovanni da Col and Stephan Palmier. The original conception of the book was to assign roughly 8 of Wittgenstein's comments, which varied from one line to several pages long, to each of 8 or 9 anthropologists, who would then provide their own commentaries on them. I chose my eight and was the first to complete the task, adding to them an introduction, on the relation of Frazer and Wittgenstein more generally. Apparently the other authors had trouble with the original concept, because eventually, the format seems to have been abandoned and book came out as a fairly run-of-the-mill series of essays. By this time however I had been purged from the project after disagreements with one of the editors on unrelated issues.*

It occurred to me these comments might be of some interest but it's hard to imagine how it would be possible to actually publish something written in such an experimental format. So I thought this might be something worth putting on my website.

Some of the greatest of mid-twentieth century philosophers found themselves confounded by anthropological material. Ludwig Wittgenstein became fascinated with Frazer's Golden Bough in 1930. His intellectual biographers consider it a key turning point in the path that lead him from the positivism of the *Tractatus* to his later work on language games; he originally intended to use his comments on Frazer as an introduction to his *Philosophical Investigations*, but later changed his mind. In the end he never managed to turn them into a publishable work, but just kept periodically reworking them for the rest of his life. Indeed, after the *Tractatus* he never published another book at all.

Sartre had a similar experience with the potlatch; when he was writing his *Notebooks For an Ethics*, he apparently found it so difficult to account for the institution that, after a series of false starts, he gave up, ultimately abandoning any attempt to produce a systematic ethics.

If anthropologists find Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer* confounding too, it's for a different reason: they find the very existence of the text an embarrassment. Much like Hegel's notorious refutation of Phrenology in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is considered absurd, even slightly scandalous, that such a great philosopher should have chosen to waste so much of their time on such obviously wrong ideas in the first place.

In a way this just exemplifies everything that makes Frazer such an irritant for the discipline: for all that he embodies everything the discipline has rejected, he is still, to this day, the world's most influential anthropologist. *The Golden Bough* has remained continually in print for 120 years, and continues to sell thousands of copies in dozens of languages across the world each year; it has inspired some of the greatest works of 20th century literature, and still inspires poets, novelists, artists, and filmmakers.

The core of Frazer's appeal, I think, is the fact that he is not a relativist, but a universalist. He may claim to be making an evolutionist argument, but what he actually does in the book is present an encyclopedic list of strikingly analogous customs and beliefs drawn from widely scattered parts of the world; customs and beliefs which invariably resonate with those of the reader's own tradition (pretty much whatever that tradition might be); and to present it all in a tone of deeply sensuous appreciation that utterly flies in the face of his periodic dismissals of his material as silly superstition. Hence the book can be, and generally has been, read as a kind of grammar of the human soul: The Great Mother. The Cosmic Fire. The Dying God. The Scapegoat.

The reason the book remains so popular is that no subsequent anthropologist has produced anything remotely like it.

Nowadays, *The Golden Bough* is regularly dismissed in anthropology survey classes—if it appears at all—as the very epitome of a laughably outmoded, evolutionist anthropology suited perhaps to an age of unapologetic colonialism, but which the discipline has long since overcome. It cannot be denied the book lends itself to such a reading.

Its ostensible premise is that magic, ritual, and hence by extension religion, are based on a series of intellectual mistakes. What's more, Frazer states this premise in such a condescending fashion (this is the just the way "ignorant and dull-witted people everywhere" tend to think) that it is very difficult not to simply reply, "no, Sir James, it is not the 'savages' who are making an intellectual mistake here: you are" and dismiss the whole corpus as a naïve specimen of the childhood of the discipline. But this immediately brings up two problems. The first is logical. If we have progressed beyond progressivist views, then progressive views are on some fundamental level correct, or we could not have progressed beyond them. But if that is true, then we have not progressed beyond them. Which means Frazer is not wrong. (Or if he is wrong, it's because he has embraced the wrong kind of evolutionism, and it is incumbent on his critics to explain what is the right kind. But of course no one attempts to do that.)

The second dilemma is that if we reject Frazer as a condescending snob, we fall in danger of becoming one. After all, what of all those millions of people who continue to read and appreciate *The Golden Bough*? Are they just too "ignorant and dull-witted" to know better?

By the last decades of Frazer's life, his work, which purported to stand for science and to reject myth and ritual as absurdities, came to be almost universally discounted by those who considered themselves to be social scientists, even as it was increasingly embraced by poets and artists who felt myth and ritual did indeed hold value in themselves. One might imagine this would disturb Frazer. By all accounts it did not. Instead, he embraced his situation not just with equanimity but enthusiasm, allowing himself to be turned into a mythic figure in his own right, playing host to foreign celebrities and literary icons, holding elaborate birthday rituals at Trinity College, Cambridge, featuring mistletoe and indoor fireworks. He even tried his hand at poetry

himself, celebrating the "dreamland world of fancy" he found in dusty tomes to be his "true home" and immortality.[1]

Wittgenstein, who like Frazer was based in Trinity, must have known all this, and clearly, found it deeply irritating. It's hard to imagine two more different intellectual personalities. Where Frazer was complacent, Wittgenstein was unforgiving; where Frazer embraced the lush contradictions of his life, Wittgenstein was driven by a monastic craving for consistency; where Frazer wanted everyone to love him, Wittgenstein recoiled in horror at the prospect that anyone might.

Frazer was by temperament a man of letters who embraced science primarily as a means to demonstrate the absurdity of the Christian faith; Wittgenstein was a former scientist and logician who had, since experiencing Tolstoy in the trenches of World War I, been driven by a passionate desire to reconcile analytic philosophy with a Christian faith that he felt was beyond the human capacity for explanation. He was first drawn to read *The Golden Bough* by a desire to demonstrate the intrinsic value of all forms of religious expression ("even those of the most primitive tribes"). What he found, instead, was a work about magic written in a tone of high- handed dismissal.[2]

His resultant indignation sears through the *Remarks*. Wittgenstein continually accuses Frazer of "stupidity." Most contemporary anthropologists would no doubt agree; but unlike contemporary anthropologists, Wittgenstein also clearly felt the *way* in which Frazer was stupid was, still, somehow, profoundly important—otherwise he would not have continued for the rest of his life to work and rework his responses to *the Golden Bough* (and not just to Frazer's material, also to his interpretations). Over the course of these reflections, he anticipated, in one form or another, most of the approaches to ritual that anthropologists, too, were to develop in mid-century. But this was incidental. Wittgenstein never developed these insights and had no interest in seeing others doing so. He was in no sense attempting to lay the foundations for some future, more adequate, social science.

Indeed, he was unsure of the value of science of *any* sort:

> The truly apocalyptic view of the world is that things do *not* repeat themselves. It is not e.g. absurd to believe that the scientific & technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity, that the idea of Great Progress is a bedazzlement, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge & that humanity, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means clear that this is not how things are.[3]

Wittgenstein appears to have seized on Frazer as an icon of the worst pretensions of science, in their most arrogant and simple-minded form—and by extension of all those scientistic instincts he was trying to identify, and purge, in himself. As a result, the *Remarks* might best be read as a kind of spiritual exercise; a discipline of purification, abnegation, and humility before the depths of a human soul whose grammar he felt could never ultimately be written. Insofar as they are such an exercise, any attempt to employ them as tools for the construction of some new social theory could only be a kind of betrayal.

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[1] "June in Cambridge," in *The Gorgon's Head and Other Literary Pieces* (London, MacMillan, 1927, pages 439–40).

[2] "'All religions are wonderful,' he told Drury, 'even those of the most primitive tribes. The ways in which people express their religious feelings differ enormously.'" In Monk, Ray, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York, Vintage, 1991), page 310.

[3] MS 133 90 7.1.1947.

If so, the question for anthropologist would have to be: Is this a betrayal worth making? Is there reason to, and would it be legitimate to, (effectively) plunder the meditations of such a thinker, taking advantage of the endless flashes of brilliance that occur along the way for purposes that so clearly contradict his own? I believe the answer is: yes. Such a betrayal is indeed worthwhile. Most good ideas are poached from somewhere; and almost inevitably, that means, seized to some degree at cross-purposes to the stated intentions of the authors from whom they're taken. Many, like Frazer, don't even seem to mind. And even in the case of Wittgenstein, who gives every indication that he would, indeed, have minded, one cannot help but notice a certain ambivalence. True, he was hardly so complacent that he could, like so many anthropologists, allow himself to reject Frazer's explicit progressivism on tacit progressivist grounds; he understood such things cannot be done by half-measures; yet even so, he often hesitates—as in the passage quoted above, hedging everything in litotes, as if aware of the terrifying implications of consistency. The "apocalyptic" comment in his notebook was accompanied by another, similarly tortured reflection on whether or not he really ought (as his political instincts told him he should) embrace, rather than fear, the prospect of nuclear war. Let us, then, take the side of that wavering Wittgenstein, and see what might be poached.

#7

One would like to say: This or the other event took place here; laugh if you can.

The thought seems to be: How can anyone possibly deny there is something deep and terrible happening in the death of a sacred king, when a man is exalted as a god, then butchered? How can anyone greet this with contemptuous dismissal? But of course this is precisely what Frazer claims to do. If his explanatory framework is taken literally, there is nothing particularly deep here; simply a series of misunderstandings about the operations of the forces of nature, which cause some of the more ignorant of the world's inhabitants to feel that they can only transfer the divine spirit from an old king to a new one if the death of the old king occurs under controlled conditions.

Ultimately, it's all just foolishness and nothing more. Yet Frazer's own decision to begin his book with this example, to deploy it to seduce the reader, reveals that on some level he is perfectly well aware that it is not just foolishness, and that his explanatory framework is not to be taken literally. There *is* something deeply moving here. He isn't really laughing at all. He's just pretending to laugh.

Think of Wittgenstein's encounter with Frazer as a series of frustrated conversations with a man who wasn't there. It should be noted that, for a philosopher of language, Wittgenstein had a remarkably ambivalent attitude towards conversation. In part this is due to the positivist, analytical, tradition in which he was trained, and never rejected.

Philosophy was in its essence about the confrontation of (an imaginary) autonomous individual with a world of objects. Dialogue largely consisted of a series of distractions in the pursuit of certainty.

Sometimes he took this prejudice to unparalleled extremes:

> Reading the Socratic dialogues, one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What's the point of these arguments that prove nothing & clarify nothing?[4]

Bertrand Russell recorded the following conversation in a letter to a friend (Lucy Mary Donnelly) in 1913:

> Then my Austrian, Wittgenstein, burst in like a whirlwind, just back from Norway, and determined to return there at once and live in complete solitude until he has solved *all* the problems of logic. I said it would be dark, and he said he hated daylight. I said it would be lonely, and he said he prostituted his mind talking to intelligent people. I said he was mad, and he said God preserve him from sanity. (God certainly will.)[5]

Imaginary conversations, on the other hand, abound especially in his notes and lectures. There was one storied moment, however, when a real-life conversation did make a profound—indeed, life- transformative—impression on Wittgenstein. In a conversation on a train with the young Italian leftist economist Piero Sraffa, Wittgenstein was explaining his argument in the *Tractatus* that any proposition must have the same logical form as its referent. Sraffa replied with a classic Neapolitan gesture of contempt, brushing his fingers out from under his chin. "Then what," he asked, "is the logical form of *that*?"

Wittgenstein was confounded. In some versions of the story, he is even said to have replied, "Oh my God. I was wrong!" and set out to rethink his entire philosophy at that very moment. By all accounts the exchange played a key role in setting him on a course which led ultimately both to the fascination with forms of expression beyond words in the *Remarks*, and to his arguments that language can only be understood as a set of rule- bound games in *Philosophical Investigations*.

Taken in this context, Remark #7, the fact Wittgenstein chose to put this one enigmatic sentence near the head of the collection, suddenly makes better sense. The entire series of reflections is driven by, and consists largely of, an endlessly layered dialectic of respect and contempt. Wittgenstein seeks to discover what is to be respected in all religious feeling. He encounters Frazer's contempt, and reacts with scorn and anger. The ritual episodes he chooses to highlight, too, almost always center on, or at least allude to, gestures of honor and degradation, respect and contempt. This is what makes a ritual killing different than mere death, or even murder. It is the fusion of honor and degradation in a single catastrophic act. It would seem that, if for Wittgenstein humans are ceremonial animals, this is what ceremonial is primarily about.

> ***#9***
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> ***Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction, and does achieve it, too. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied.***
>
> ***One could also kiss the name of the loved one, and here the representation through the name [as a place-holder] would be clear.***

[4] MS 111 55: 30.7.1931.

[5] In Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life: Young Ludwig, 1889–1921* (Berkeley, U California Press, 188), volume I, page 184.

Wittgenstein is trying to represent ritual behavior as non-utilitarian. It does not aim to change the world in a practically advantageous way. It does not aim at something outside itself at all. But our language makes this very hard to express. To "explain" a custom is to cast it as a way of doing something else. So he says: I kiss a picture of my beloved not because I think it will have an effect on my beloved, but rather, to express my feelings. But then he adds: that makes me feel satisfied in itself. He immediately takes it back, realizing even by saying this that he is adopting a tacitly utilitarian logic. Similarly with his remark (#31) about striking the ground or a tree in anger with a stick: it expresses something, it is a gesture of punishment that one knows can punish nothing. But does that mean one is exorcising the anger, through some kind of catharsis, so that the act is pragmatic in a certain way after all? Or is the sense of satisfaction not the aim but just something that follows afterward? And is one really satisfied after kissing a picture, or striking a tree, at all?

This is the trap. On the one hand, one can adopt a position of pure expressivism, in which case, no explanation is possible, only description. One school of interpretation insists that is exactly what Wittgenstein is arguing. But in other passages he makes clear he is not saying this. (Anyway it makes no sense, every description is based on some tacit assumptions and is therefore itself a form of explanation.) But how to offer an explanation that does not imply some sort of psychological hydraulics, some kind of utilitarian trade-off of energy for satisfaction?

The quintessential form of action that is not aimed at some utilitarian end is play. Yet Wittgenstein clearly doesn't like play. This seems to be the real core of the dilemma. Frazer is playful. Even if somewhat despite himself.[6] Hence his affinity for magic. Wittgenstein prefers a language of games—"language games" is his most famous coinage.

The reason is again because the reverential, religious temperament is all about respect. Games imply respect because games have rules and rules are to be respected. By respecting the rules players can be said respect one another. Play in its minimal form, sheer action for its own sake, is often conceived as a kind of primordial magma from which rule-bound games emerge. But it is not about respect. It is in a sense prior to anything that could be respected.

One can say: if theoretical explanation is itself a kind of language game, then what makes Frazer naïve is his assumption that there can only be one such game and those performing the rituals must therefore be playing the same game as he. In fact one could argue he makes this naïve assumption on two levels. One is explicit: he is making intellectualist interpretations, and also insisting that those who practice magic are proceeding along intellectualist lines too (just, foolishly). The other is unacknowledged: those conducting the rituals are engaged in expressing unspeakable truths about the human condition, about our tragic doomed nature, about hope and cruelty, and doing so in deeply moving ways; and so is Frazer when he writes his compelling descriptions of the ritual.

Wittgenstein is saying: I wish to create a different theoretical game. But does he? Or does he fall into the same trap?

Often, he does seem to be falling into it: i.e., he wishes to respect ritual gestures but finds them to themselves be all about respect. When he first conceived the project, he assumed there had to be a homology. "Only something supernatural," he wrote in his notebooks in 1929, "can express

[6] He really couldn't help himself. As far as I'm aware, the only other anthropologist who's fully appreciated this aspect of Frazer is Mary Douglas, who notes, for instance, his inability not to insert the most whimsical or amusing elements in a story even if they entirely contradict the thrust of his narrative: "Judgments on James Frazer," in *In the Active Voice*, London, Routledge, 1982, p.280).

the Supernatural."[7] Later he wavered. A year later, he was expressing frustration with ritual itself. "Everything ritualistic (everything that, as it were, smacks of the high priest) is strictly to be avoided because it straightaway turns rotten." But then he immediately raised an objection to himself. "Of course a kiss is a ritual too & it isn't rotten; but no more ritual is permissible than is as genuine as a kiss."[8]

#13

Why should it not be possible for someone's own name to be sacred to himself? On the one hand, it surely is the most important instrument given to him, and, on the other, like a jewel hung around his neck at birth.

How misleading Frazer's explanations are becomes clear, I think, from the fact that one could very well invent primitive practices oneself, and it would only be by chance if they were not actually found somewhere. That is, the principle according to which these practices are ordered is a much more general one than [it appears] in Frazer's explanation, and it exists in our own soul, so that we could think up all the possibilities ourselves. – We can thus readily imagine

that, for instance, the king of a tribe becomes visible for no one, but also that every member of the tribe is obliged to see him. The latter will then certainly not occur in a manner more or less left to chance, instead he will be shown to the people. Perhaps no one will be allowed to touch him, or perhaps they will be compelled to touch him. Think how after Schubert's death his brother cut Schubert's scores into small pieces and gave to his favorite pupils these pieces of a few bars. As a gesture of piety, this action is just as comprehensible that that of preserving the scores untouched and accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burnt the scores, this could still be understood as a gesture of piety.

The ceremonial (hot or cold) as opposed to the haphazard (lukewarm) is what characterizes piety.

Yes, Frazer's explanations would not be explanations at all if they did not, in the end, appeal to an inclination in ourselves.

Eating and drinking have their dangers, not only for the savage, but also for us; nothing more natural than wanting to protect oneself against them; and we could think up such protective measures ourselves. – But what principle do we follow in confabulating them? Clearly that of formally reducing all dangers to a few very simple ones that are ready to see for everyone. In other words, according to the same principle that leads uneducated people in our society to say that the illness is moving from the head to the chest, etc., etc.

In these simple images personification will, of course, play a great role, for everyone knows that people (hence [also] spirits) can become dangerous to others.

[7] MS 107 192 c: 10.11.1929.
[8] MS 109 204: 6–7.11.1930

> ***That a human shadow, which looks like a human being, or one's mirror image, that rain, thunderstorms, the phases of the moon, the change of seasons, the likeness or difference of animals to one another and to human beings, the phenomenon of death, of birth and of sexual life, in short, everything what a human being senses around himself, year in, year out, in manifold mutual connection – that all this should play a role in the thought of human beings (their philosophy) and in their practices is self-evident, or, in other words, it is what we really know and find interesting.***
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> ***How could the fire or the fire's resemblance to the sun have failed to make an impression on the awakening mind of man? But not perhaps "because he can't explain it to himself" (the stupid superstition of our time) – for does an 'explanation' make it less impressive? –***
>
> ***The magic in "Alice in Wonderland", trying to dry out by reading the driest thing there is.***

For Wittgenstein ritual is always about piety, the sacred, respect. (Or it's inversion, disrespect.) While that which we respect is inexpressible in language, the forms that respect takes constitute a limited and comprehensible repertoire that, he notes, is essentially what mark us as human. A grammar of such gestures could be written. In this grammar, opposites are identical: it is quite the same thing to hide something, or to insist everyone look at it; to preserve an object forever, or to rip it into shreds.

Here again one can understand Wittgenstein's simultaneous rage against, and fascination with, Frazer. Frazer shows no respect.

Wittgenstein returns several times to the point that anyone could have invented many of the practices Frazer describes themselves, regardless of historical context, and people often do. This, he observes, must render Frazer's argument that they can only be understood as historical survivals false. True enough. But here is the problem: many engaged in the business of creating rituals and symbols clearly felt that, even though these things did "exist in our own soul," such improvisation was not enough. This is precisely why Frazer's book was so successful: because so many engaged in such improvisation did in fact turn to *The Golden Bough* for inspiration, and felt that the idea that there was an ancient history behind those gestures did, in fact, add something, gave them greater depth and power. This is also the secret, I suspect, to the book's enduring appeal. It's not just that, as Edmund Leach once remarked, ordinary people like to read descriptions of human sacrifice ("ignorant and dull-witted folk" again), but because no work of contemporary anthropology really offers such a detailed of grammar of possible ritual gestures (asperging in water, passing over fire, invoking, evoking, exorcising, setting apart, mimicking, destroying…)

William Butler Yeats saw no contradiction in drawing images and interpretations from Frazer in his poetry, and at the same time participating in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an organization aimed at reviving the practice of ceremonial magic Frazer claimed to revile; indeed, even magicians like Aleister Crowley, Yeats' great rival in that Order, were avid readers of Frazer, Crowley incorporating his analysis of sympathetic magic in his own practical guides, apparently, not the least bit phased by Frazer's insistence that these marked false understandings of physics (he simply insisted that modern physics was only just coming around to the point of understanding such principles were, on a certain level, true.)

Perhaps this is not all that surprising. Frazer, for all his scoffing, was ultimately sympathetic with magicians—religion was his real enemy. As he duly noted, it was the magicians and alchemists who went underground during the Age of Religion who ultimately paved the way for the creation of modern science. Wittgenstein in contrast was only really interested in magic insofar as it could be reduced to a religious impulse. And he saw science, or at least, the popular faith in science as religion, as the real superstitious foolishness: the idea one can only sense an affinity between fire, and the sun, let alone because they lack knowledge of physics and chemical reactions, is, he observes, absurd.

His objections are surely on the mark, and for at least three reasons. First of all, such an idea is absurd because most people anywhere— including most contemporary philosophers and anthropologists—are not scientists and cannot explain combustion at all, but merely have faith that others can; second, it is absurd because even scientists can offer at best partial explanations; and third, it is absurd because even if everyone did have comprehensive knowledge of the science of combustion, it would still tell us almost nothing about what we ultimately find impressive, magical—what we respect—in fire (or childbirth, or erotic attraction) to begin with.

Wittgenstein was concerned with ritual as ethics, as an expression of awe and wonder before that which cannot be captured in language. Probably for that reason, actually writing up a grammar of forms of ritual respect—to follow the insight about Schubert's brother by, say, declaring the existence of a "principle of the identity of inverse gestures," proceeding to compile a list similar principles (reduction, personification…) and analyze how these principles tend to interact in ritual contexts—all this must have itself seemed disrespectful. He lays the groundwork. But then pulls back.

(Would it really be disrespectful to write a universal grammar of forms of respect? As an anthropologist who has himself once attempted such a project, I find this question challenging.[9] My first reaction is no: an effort to explain the existence of respect might well be disrespectful, but to simply describe the common internal logic of forms of respect is not.)

> ***#31***
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> ***I read, among many similar examples, of a rain-king in Africa to whom the people appeal for rain when the rainy season comes. But surely this does not mean that they actually think he can make rain, for otherwise they would do it in the dry periods of the year when the land is "a parched and arid desert" [English in the original]. For if one assumes that the people once instituted the office of the rain-king out of stupidity, it certainly still is clear that they would have previously made the experience that the rains commence in March, and they could have let the rain king perform his work during the other parts of the year. Or again: towards morning, when the sun is about to rise, people celebrate rites of day-break, but not at night, for then they simply burn lamps.***
>
> ***When I am angry about something, I sometimes hit the ground or a tree with my cane. But surely I do not believe that the ground is at fault or that the***

[9] "Manners, Deference and Private Property." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Spring 1997) volume 39 number 4, pages 694–728. (The essay also appears, in slightly improved form, as the first chapter of *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire* (Oakland, AK Press, 2007). It might be considered a mark of the Wittgensteinian temperament of contemporary anthropology that this essay has been almost entirely ignored.

> ***hitting would help matters. "I vent my anger." And all rites are of this kind. One can call such practices instinctual behavior. – And a historical explanation, for instance that I or my ancestors earlier believed that hitting the ground would help is mere shadow-boxing, for these [sic] are superfluous assumptions that explain nothing. What is important is the semblance of the practice to an act of punishment, but more than this semblance cannot be stated.***
>
> ***Once such a phenomenon is brought into relation with an instinct that I possess myself, it thus constitutes the desired explanation; that is, one that resolves this particular difficulty. And further investigation of the history of my instinct now proceeds along different tracks.***

The fact that rainmaking ceremonies are conducted only before the rainy season suggests it is not a mistaken attempt to bring the rains. But this leads to a further question: if it is not an attempt to influence the weather, why is it that those conducting the ceremony insist that it is?

This question holds for the whole of the approach that was directly inspired by Wittgenstein, most famously Peter Winch's critique of Evans-Pritchard's Zande material. If magic is not a mistaken way of affecting nature but, rather, an expressive way of confronting the fact that one cannot affect certain aspects of nature, why does it take the form of a claim that this interpretation is not true? Does this have something to do with the social nature of the expression: the fact that everyone is acting as if it is true because they all feel they have persuaded others to believe it? If so, the Mauss-Durkheim argument that magic is individual and asocial ("there is no church of magic") is only partially true. Since if one performs magic entirely in secret, one has not really performed it at all. Others must know there is a secret.

Magic would then be that social form in which sociality is denied.

If so the question becomes: is this magic's essence, or merely an incidental feature? Might any social form in which sociality is denied be referred to as "magical"?

Wittgenstein came close to the conclusion this was indeed the essence of magic in his initial suggestion that insofar as metaphysics (the Idealism that his tutor Russell had taught him to define himself against), was a set of illusions born of a lack of clear understanding of the workings of language, it could be considered a form of magic. The problem of course was that this meant either that magic really was just a set of mistakes, or that metaphysics was not. At first he thought he could avoid this dilemma by saying it was possible to keep that which was "deep" in magic, but reject the superficial aspects. But ultimately the conundrum appears to have become unsupportable and he abandoned the idea.

Still, anyone who has observed magical practice *en situ* is aware that it plays, for its power, on just such conundrums. Magic operates along the borders between the truths of social power—that domain where statements ("I am the governor of this province") are true precisely to the degree one can persuade others to believe them—and those truths (we usually call them "natural" ones) whose reality rests in their ability to resist any such act of persuasion (even were the governor to persuade everyone in the province he could fly, were he to leap from a cliff, he would still plummet to his death.) Not only is the border between these zones never clear, but much of the persuasiveness of both magic, and politics, rests on playing games with that very lack of clarity: there is always wonder, trickery, the possibility of fraud, complicity, endless gradients of doubt. Frazer denied all this in his theory, since he wasn't interested in social context, but he ended up

playing similar games in his own literary practice; Wittgenstein, who saw the aim of philosophy as above all establishing a form of clarity, of clearing away conceptual rubbish, was repelled by such machinations. He thus set out on the impossible mission, as here, of finding a dimension in which magic could be said to be something pure.

> ***#38***
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> ***179. (The Malays conceive the human soul as a little man...who corresponds exactly in shape, proportion, and even in complexion to the man in whose body he resides...)***
>
> ***How much more truth in granting the soul the same multiplicity as the body, than in a watered down modern theory.***
>
> ***Frazer does not realize that what we are facing here are the teachings of Plato and Schopenhauer.***
>
> ***We re-encounter all childish (infantile) theories in contemporary philosophy; only without the charm of childishness.***

There have been many commentaries on these *Remarks*, but none, as far as I know, make any mention of #38. It seems on the face of it to move in an entirely different, even contradictory, direction from the others, which insist that Frazer is wrong to treat "primitive" ritual and belief as based on theories of any kind, let alone "childish" ones.

It would seem Wittgenstein is here saying that some childish theories are in fact correct. It is not entirely clear whether he is referring here primarily to Plato's notion of the multiple soul, which could perhaps be said to be echoed in Schopenhauer (via Spinoza), or to Schopenhauer's soul as microcosm, which could be said to be anticipated in Plato (at least in the *Timaeus*). But this is less important than the key point, which, I think, is that the mere existence of theories, even "infantile" ones, does not itself mean these theories are the basis of action.

True, some minimal theories regarding the nature of the world could be said to be necessarily implicit in any form of action, and cognitive psychologists have indeed identified a "naïve physics," "naïve psychology," and so forth already present in newborn infants, but how these come to be elaborated, and made explicit, through action in a different cultural contexts is only beginning to be investigated—let alone understood. Anthropologists meanwhile still have an unfortunate tendency to seek out the most explicit, elaborate, and authoritative statements about the nature of the soul, the cosmos, time, or social relations they can find in any cultural environment, and to treat these statements as if they were explicit formulations of tacit theories shared by everyone, which, in turn, they assume to be the real basis for all forms of interaction in that environment. But as philosophers often note, one can never presume a one-to-one equivalence here. People can and regularly do make arguments that contradict the "hard common sense" underlying their own practice of argument (i.e., when they try to persuade others that communication is impossible, or that their interlocutor does not exist.) Taken as a whole, these *Remarks* can be read as making a helpful intervention here, by suggesting that such theoretical statements might themselves be best read as forms of ritual.

True, such a formulation would still open up as many questions as it would answer.[10] But Wittgenstein emphasized his main task was to clear away debris.

> ***#44***
>
> ***Here one sees something like the remnants of a casting of lots. And through this aspect it suddenly gains depth.***
>
> ***Should we learn that the cake with the buttons was originally baked in a determinate case, say, in honor of a button- maker on the occasion of his birthday, and that the practice had then merely persisted on a local level, it would in fact lose all its 'depth', unless this were to lie in its present form as such. But in this case it is often said: "this custom is obviously ancient." How does one know that? Is it merely because historical evidence for ancient practices of this sort is at hand? Or is there another reason, one that we can attain through interpretation? But even if its prehistoric origin and its descent from an earlier practice is historically established, then it is still possible that today there is nothing at all sinister about the practice anymore, that nothing of the ancient horror still adheres to it. Perhaps it is only performed by children today who have contests in baking cakes and decorating them with buttons. If so, then the depth would thus only lie in the thought of such ancestry. Yet this can very well be uncertain and one feels like saying: "Why worry about something so uncertain" (like a backwards-looking Kluge Elise). But worries of that kind are not involved here. – Above all: whence the certainty that such a practice must be ancient (what are the data, what the verification)? But have we any certainty, could we not be mistaken and proven to be in error by historical means?***
>
> ***Certainly, but there still remains something of which we are sure. We would then say: "Very well, in this case the origin may be different, but in general it is surely ancient." What constitutes evidence for us of this must entail the depth of this assumption. And this evidence, again, is non- hypothetical, psychological. For when I say: what is deep about this lies in its origin if it did come about in this way, then such deepness lies either in the thought of [its derivation from] such origins, or else the deepness is in itself hypothetical – in which case one can only say: if that is how it went, then this was a deep and sinister business. What I want to say is this: what is sinister, deep [about all this] does not lie in how the history of this practice actually went, for perhaps it did not go that way at all; nor that it maybe or [even] probably went that way, but in what gives me reason to assume so. What makes human sacrifice so deep and sinister in the first place? For is it only the suffering of the victim that impress us thus? All manners of illnesses bring about just as much suffering, and yet do not evoke this impression. No, this deep and sinister aspect***

[10] Are all theoretical statements ritual? Or can they merely be said to have a greater or less ritual aspect? What does it mean that some ritual statements pretend to be other than they are (the rain-making question again)? At what point does a mere observation about the nature of the world become a "theory" and hence ritual, and what does this imply for theoretical statements about ritual?

does not become self-evident just from our knowledge of the history of the external actions; rather we impute it to them [reintroduce it into them] on the basis of an inner experience of our own.

The fact that a cake is utilized in drawing the lots does have something especially horrible (almost like betrayal through a kiss), and that this would impress us as so horrible is, again, of essential importance or the investigation of such practices.

When I see such a practice, or hear of it, it is like seeing a man who speaks sternly to another for trivial reasons, and noticing from the tone of his voice and his demeanor that on a given occasion this man can be scary. The impression I get from this can be a very deep and extraordinarily sinister one.

Frank Cioffi wonders: why does Wittgenstein take Frazer to task for failing to answer a question that Frazer never asked?[11] If his aim was to explain the historical origins of a fire festival, it seems odd to accuse him of failing to explain why this fire festival still continues to evoke a feeling of sinister terror in those reading Frazer's book. There is a simple answer to this question. Almost no one reads *The Golden Bough* because they are interested in reconstructing the historical origins of fire festivals. If that were its only interest, *The Golden Bough* would have never had more than a specialized audience of antiquarians and folklorists, and even that audience would have diminished over time as more sophisticated theories developed; Wittgenstein himself would never have read the book, and neither would I have been asked to express my perspective on his comments in this book. We're all here because we know there's more going on here. Frazer seems to acknowledge this too. In a way, *The Golden Bough* itself could be read as an extremely elaborate joke. After all, Frazer claims the entire[12]- volume magnum opus is simply an attempt to provide an explanation for certain obscure lines in Vergil's *Aeneid*. Obviously he knew that is not the case—any more than Herodotus was really recounting the entire history of the world simply in order to explain the origin of the quarrel between the Greeks and the Persians. And Frazer knew his audience was in on the joke as well.

The problem then becomes: now that we have established that *The Golden Bough* is not about what it claims to be, where do we stop? Is the book really a theory of the evolutionary development of human thought at all? Or is that too just a pretext? Is it all a veiled attack on Christianity? Well, yes, we all know it is that, but that only? Or is it something even more ambitious? What's more, can one even ascribe a single purpose to a work that was so endlessly written, rewritten expanded, revised, and reformulated over fifty years of its author's life?

Since Wittgenstein ultimately came to the conclusion that the meaning of language is what it does, it seems reasonable to ask: what is the pragmatic context and effects of Frazer's language?

[11] Frank Cioffi, Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer (Cambridge CUP, 1998), p.94.

[12] It is perhaps inevitable that he did so. Wittgenstein considered sociological laws unknowable, and balked at addressing the question of how language games related to one another in practice. Here I suspect he wished to avoid coming to Kripke's conclusion that these can only be arbitrary, which would mean having to ultimate fall back either on some sort Nietzschean charisma, or arbitrary authority, but had no real alternative to offer. For my own part, I find myself largely in agreement with Roy Bhaskar's critique of Winch's attempt to construct a Wittgensteinian social theory (*The Possibility of Naturalism*, London, Routledge, 1979, pp. 146–168), which I think remains valid despite a recent Wittgensteinian counter- offensive (Nigel Pleasants, *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar*, London, Routledge, 1999).

Clearly, it is to cast a spell. Frazer's words creates a circle of complicity with its readers, drawing them into a world of fascination and horror, where it seems some kind of profound truths *must* be present, even if no one is quite sure what they are. Wittgenstein's anger appears to flow from the fact that Frazer plays this trick in order, ultimately, to shoo the demonic forces away.

This is why *The Golden Bough* is a book about magic rather than religion. Because magic is all about such tricks. It is political art that claims to be about nature. It is a social phenomenon that claims to be an individual, even often covert and anti-social practice. This is why there is and must always be something of the air of playfulness, but also tawdriness and fraud about magic. Frazer's games are in fact typical of the magician. He not only describes magic, but does so in a way that embodies and performs it. All this is precisely what Wittgenstein, with his pious temperament, finds infuriating.

Wittgenstein then is interested in magic mainly as a form of religion, even as Frazer is interested in religion mainly as a form of magic. Hence the answer to his question on human sacrifice. Sacrifice is terrible because it is *not* magic. Because it does not simply reduce one's death to some pragmatic purpose, but rather because it sacralizes, then destroys.

#45

The environment of a way of acting.

It is telling that this, the most fragmentary of all the fragments, is also the most explicitly about context.

Frazer was a master of decontextualization. He took bits of rituals, customs, symbolic gestures from different cultural environments— Indonesian fisherfolk, Sudanese pastoralists, Silesian peasants— snipped them from their contexts, and then rearranged them by what he took to be their conceptual similarities, so as to make general points about human ritual life. This kind of snipping and rearrangement of snippets was, of course, a classic modernist technique. The Dadaists and Surrealists are most famous for it —though they were using the technique, ostensibly, to quite opposite effect. For them, radical decontextualization was seen as a way of mirroring the alienation of market society, yet at the same time, driving its fragmentation and juxtaposition of experience, it's conceptual blender effect that destroyed everything numinous and sacred to such an extreme that it became a revolutionary force in its own right; one that ultimately exposed and undermined capitalism. Frazer is doing the opposite. He is snipping and combining similar customs from wildly scattered societies so as to provide (whatever he *claims* to be doing) a vision of a universal human symbolic language. At least, this is how the Modernists so drawn to his work tended to interpret it. If there was a way of finding some common universal language beneath the random babble of market juxtaposition, they felt it would have to be here.

What's more, these two imperatives were not seen to contradict, but to be, in some way, congruent. Tristan Tzara, the French Dadaist most famous for composing poems by cutting up newspaper stories and pulling the words out of a hat, also produced poems he claimed were translations from the Maori, or unspecified African languages. In his lifetime, he was famous for his collection of "primitive art."

Wittgenstein restricted the scissors-and-paste approach to his own thoughts, such as these *Remarks*, which he would often shuffle and arrange. The practice might seem odd, since his

theory of language was itself all about the importance of context. For Wittgenstein, the "deep grammar" of words is what the speaker is trying to do with them; these are regularized only within specific language games, which in turn have to exist within a certain environment of (at least potential) pragmatic agreement, which in the *Philosophical Investigations* he occasionally referred to as a "form of life." This fragment is one of the only places where Wittgenstein seems to push further, to talk about actions themselves as based on such agreements, but it is just a kind of molecule of thought, unmoored to anything.12

#50

681. ((680 infra, 681) ... it used to be thought that the maleficent powers of witches and wizards resided in their hair, and that nothing could make any impression on these miscreants so long as they kept their hair on. Hence in France it was customary to shave the whole bodies of persons charged with sorcery before handing them over to the torturer.)

> ***This would indicate that this is grounded in a truth rather than in superstition. (Of course it is easy to fall into a spirit of contestation [contradiction] when facing the stupid scholar). But it can very well be that the body entirely shorn of hair leads us in some sense to lose self- respect. (Brothers Karamazoff.) There is no doubt whatsoever that a mutilation which makes us look undignified, ludicrous in our own eyes can rob us of all will to defend ourselves. How embarrassed we are sometimes – or at least many people (I) – by our physical or aesthetic inferiority.***

The Dostoyevsky reference appears not to be to *The Brothers Karamazoff* but to *House of the Dead*, Dostoyevsky's account of his experience as a political prisoner in Siberia, which contains numerous references to the denuding of half of convicts' skulls, and how the combination of prison uniform, bizarrely shaved patterns of hair, and branded foreheads had the effect of turning convicts figures of fear among the civil population. This is, one might note, quite a common feature of monsters more generally —the most frightening (zombies, vampires, werewolves) threaten not just to kill you but to turn you into a monster. Prisoners were indeed turned into monsters. And perhaps there is nothing more terrifying than being rendered a permanent object of terror in other peoples' eyes.

It is telling that Wittgenstein ignores this social aspect and recalls the matter as, once again, an issue of respect—in this case, self-respect.

Dostoyevsky himself never speaks explicitly of self-respect in this connection;[13] the only time he comes close is in speaking, not of hair, but of work:

> The idea occurred to me that if one wanted to crush, to annihilate a man utterly… one need only give him work of an absolutely, completely useless and irrational character.... If he had to pour water into one vessel and back, over and over again, to pound

[13] Anna Summers suggests to me that Petr Yakubovich, a revolutionary poet who left us a diary about his experiences in same prison, might possibly have been the tacit reference, since he did write "Manacles and shorn heads have, without a doubt, but one goal–debasement of the dignity of men who are already stripped of their rights."

> sand, to move a heap of earth from one place to another and back again—I believe the convict would hang himself in a few days or would commit a thousand crimes, preferring to die rather than to endure such shame, humiliation, and torture.[14]

The world of work, let alone its meaning, play little part in either Frazer or Wittgenstein's reflections. I don't think this is simply an effect of their bourgeois backgrounds. Wittgenstein gave away his fortune and spent many years as a schoolteacher and later, hospital orderly; he was hardly unfamiliar with the world of work. But he almost never references it, even in abstract examples. Neither does he speak directly of war, political prisons, revolutions, torture, forced labor, or industrialized slaughter; as with most great thinkers of the first half of the 20th century, the extraordinary violence of the times lurks always just a little bit offstage; rarely if ever explicitly referred to in their primary works, yet still informing everything.

Frazer remained indifferent to politics, limiting his political reflections to some wistful remarks on the continued savagery of the masses.

Wittgenstein in contrast felt it was his duty to respect that savagery as an expression of the same deep and terrible essence of human life he felt he had discovered in sacrificial ritual. He detested pacifists. Wittgenstein broke with Russell in 1922 over the latter's endorsement of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, declaring he'd prefer to join a League for War and Slavery.[15] Neither did he have anything particularly against prison camps:

> If you spoke of regimentation of Russian workers, of workers not being free to leave or change their jobs, or perhaps of labour camps, Wittgenstein was not impressed. It would be terrible if the masses of people there—or in any society—had no regular work. He also thought it would terrible if the society were riddled with 'class distinctions,' though he said less about this. On the other hand, *tyranny…?*—with a questioning gesture, shrugging his shoulders—*"doesn't make me feel indignant."*[16]

[14] *House of the Dead*, 4.20

[15] In Monk, Ray, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York, Vintage, 1991), page 211. Similarly in 1946 Wittgenstein wrote, in the one explicitly political comment in his notebooks, that he couldn't help but feel there was something salutary about the threat of nuclear war since it was clearly "the dregs of the intelligentsia" who were speechifying against it (MS 131 66c 19.8.1946). For what it's worth, Frazer's politics, such as they were, reflected classic academic course-of-least- resistance conservatism: while in 1914 he declined to sign a pro-war statement claiming ignorance of the issues, two years later he supported Russell's expulsion from Cambridge for anti-war agitation (Ackerman, Robert, *J.G. Frazer his Life and Work* [Cambridge, CUP, 1987], pages 263–64.)

[16] Rhees, Rush (editor) *"Recollections of Wittgenstein: Hermine Wittgenstein, Fania Pascal, F.R. Leavis, John King, M. O'C. Drury"* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), page 205. At the risk of deeply offending Wittgenstein's many partisans, I might remark his position on war bears a definite "family resemblance" with fascism, and it seems to have been particularly what we'd now see as the fascistic aspects of Stalinism that the philosopher found appealing.

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Remarks on Wittgenstein's Remarks on Frazer
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