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WITTGENSTEIN AND REASON

Edited by
John Preston

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PREFACE

Versions of four of the papers featured here (those by Hanjo Glock, Jane Heal, Joachim Schulte and Crispin Wright) were presented to the one-day *Ratio* conference on 'Wittgenstein and Reason', held at the University of Reading in April 2006. The papers by Genia Schönbaumsfeld and Severin Schroeder were contributions invited for this volume. The paper by Jacques Bouveresse was specially translated for this volume by John Cottingham.

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WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITIQUE OF FRAZER

*Jacques Bouveresse**Abstract*

This paper provides a systematic exposition of what Wittgenstein took to be the fundamental error committed by James George Frazer, author of the classic anthropological work *The Golden Bough*, in his account of ritual practices. By construing those rituals in scientific or rationalistic terms, as aimed at the production of certain effects, Frazer ignores, according to Wittgenstein, their expressive and symbolic dimension. It is, moreover, an error to try to explain the powerful emotions evoked even today by traditions such as fire festivals (which may once have involved human sacrifice) by searching for their causal origins in history or prehistory; the disquieting nature of such practices needs to be understood by attending to the inner meaning they already have in our human lives. Certain important general lessons are drawn about the necessarily limited power of scientific and causal explanations when it comes to alleviating many of our fundamental perplexities not just in the area of anthropology but in philosophy as well.¹

Drury provides the following account of the circumstances which led Wittgenstein to read and comment on Frazer's *Golden Bough*:

Wittgenstein told me he had long wanted to read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and he asked me to get hold of a copy out of the Union library and read it out loud to him. I took out the first volume of the full edition, and we continued to read from it for some weeks. He would stop me from time to time and make comments on Frazer's remarks. He was particularly

¹ Originally published in French as 'Wittgenstein, Critique de Frazer', *Agone* 23 (2000), pp. 33–54. Translated into English (with minor editorial corrections and additional bibliographical references and abstract) specially for the present issue of *Ratio* by John Cottingham, by kind permission of Jacques Bouveresse and Editions Agone, Marseilles. English version © John Cottingham. The translator is grateful to Severin Schroeder and Christopher Wingfield for helpful corrections to an earlier draft.

emphatic that it was wrong to think, as Frazer seemed to do, that primitive rituals were in the nature of scientific errors. He pointed out that besides these (ritual) customs, primitive peoples had quite an advanced technique [skills] in agriculture, metal working, pottery etc. The ceremonies that Frazer described were expressions of deeply felt emotions, of religious awe. Frazer himself showed that he partly understood this, for on the very first page he refers to Turner's picture of the wood of Nemi and the feeling of dread that this picture arouses in us when we remember the ritual murder performed there. In reading of these practices, we are not amused by a scientific mistake but ourselves feel some trace of the dread which lay behind them.²

The Golden Bough does indeed begin with a description which suggested to Wittgenstein that Frazer had grasped the problem he should have tackled but in fact wholly failed to resolve:

Who does not know Turner's picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination in which the divine mind of Turner steeped and transfigured even the fairest natural landscape, is a dream-like vision of the little woodland lake of Nemi – 'Diana's Mirror', as it was called by the ancients. No one who has seen that calm water, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it. The two characteristic Italian villages which slumber on its banks, and the equally Italian palace whose terraced gardens descend steeply to the lake, hardly break the stillness and even the solitariness of the scene. Diana herself might still linger by this lonely shore, still haunt these woodlands wild.

In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy. In order to understand it aright we must try to form in our minds an accurate picture of the place where it happened; for, as we shall see later on, a subtle link subsisted between the natural beauty of the spot and the dark crimes which under the mask of religion were often perpetrated here, crimes which after the lapse of so many ages still lend a touch of

² M. O'C. Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Personal Recollections*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 134-5.

melancholy to those quiet woods and waters, like a chill breath of autumn on one those bright September days 'while not a leaf seems faded'.³

What Drury learnt from Wittgenstein on this type of question is essentially that one may mistakenly assimilate to a problem of scientific explanation what is in fact a difficulty that can be resolved entirely by the simple task of philosophical clarification:

Frazer thinks he can make *clear* the origin of the rites and ceremonies he describes by regarding them as primitive and erroneous scientific beliefs. The words he uses are, 'We shall do well to look with leniency upon the errors as inevitable slips made in the search for truth.' Now Wittgenstein made it clear to me that on the contrary the people who practised these rites already possessed a considerable scientific achievement: agriculture, metalworking, building, etc., etc.; and the ceremonies existed alongside these sober techniques. They were not mistaken beliefs that produced the rites but the need to express something; the ceremonies were a form of language, a form of life. Thus today, if we are introduced to someone we shake hands; if we enter a church we take off our hats and speak in a low voice; at Christmas perhaps we decorate a tree. These are expressions of friendliness, reverence, and of celebration. We do not believe that shaking hands has any mysterious efficacy, or that to keep one's hat on in church is dangerous! Now this I regard as a good illustration of how I understand clarity as something to be desired as a goal, as distinct from clarity as something to serve a further elaboration. For seeing these rites as a form of language immediately puts an end to all the elaborate theorizing concerning 'primitive mentality'. The clarity here prevents a condescending misunderstanding, and puts a full-stop to a lot of idle speculation.⁴

Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer unquestionably show a very marked preference for interpreting ritual practices in expressive and symbolic terms – a view recently defended by Beattie:

³ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* [1890], abridged edition (London: Macmillan, 1922), Ch. 1, §1, p. 1. All references are to this edition, which is the one that Wittgenstein used in writing up his notes on Frazer.

⁴ M. O'C. Drury, *The Danger of Words* (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. x–xi.

In my 1965 Malinowski Lecture [‘Ritual and Social Change’, *Man* (N.S.) 1 (1966), pp. 60–74] I developed the theme that the ideas and procedures which we generally call ‘ritual’ differ from those which we call ‘practical’ and ‘scientific (or ‘proto-scientific’) in that they contain, or may contain, an expressive, symbolic quality, which is not found in technical thought or activity as such. I argued that even though both expressive and ‘practical’ modes may be and often are combined in the same course of thought or action, we need to distinguish them, for they imply different attitudes to experience, and call for different kinds of understanding. ‘Practical’, empirically based procedures are essentially understood when the ends sought and the techniques used by the actor are grasped. The understanding of ritual acts, however, requires in addition the comprehension of the meanings which the participant’s ideas and acts have, or may have, as symbolic statements; the kinds of mental associations they involve; and the types of symbolic classification they imply. Thus, following Raymond Firth, Leach, and others, I argued that understanding religious and magical rites is in these respects more like understanding art than it is like understanding modern science. I went on to suggest that the belief in the efficacy of ritual (where, as is usually the case, it is believed to produce results) is not, like the belief in ‘science’ however proto-typical, based on experience and hypothesis-testing, but is rather founded in the imputation of a special power to symbolic or dramatic expression itself.⁵

Frazer’s mistake is to have employed, in these contexts, a model of analysis based on means-ends rationality. He took the idea of a means employed to further a given end and applied it (or in our view more or less flagrantly misapplied it) to practices whose nature required them to be understood in a completely different way. In effect, as Nicole Belmont and Michel Izard have noted in connection with the judgement made by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* on the ceremony of the scapegoat, Frazer ‘seems unaware of the whole nature and functioning of symbols.’⁶ This is evidently one of the main areas where Wittgenstein thinks the judgement

⁵ J. H. M. Beattie, ‘On Understanding Ritual’, in B. R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 240–1.

⁶ See Frazer, *Le Rameau d’Or*, ed. Henri Peyre (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1981), Vol. 1, p. xxi.

Frazer passes on the primitive and infantile outlook of 'savages' can be immediately turned back against him. Yet at the same time Wittgenstein equally reproaches Frazer for supposing that the reason why certain actions are performed in certain circumstances is always a desire to produce a certain (beneficial) effect;⁷ and it is clear from this that even the explanation of ritual acts as consisting in the deployment of a symbolic power, attributed to the expressive acts in question, is in his eyes far too general. A good number of ritual actions cannot in fact plausibly be construed as resting on a belief in causal efficacy of a symbolic type, and really have no other purpose than to express something. 'Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied.'⁸

Wittgenstein's scepticism about our ability to construct a theory explaining ritual acts (in the broad sense) by attributing to them some goal or purpose, or some definite function, is eventually broadened to include all explanatory attempts of this kind: 'I think it might be regarded as a fundamental law of natural history that, whenever something in nature "has a function", "serves a purpose", the same thing also occurs in circumstances where it serves none, is even "dysfunctional" [*unzweckdienlich*]. If dreams sometimes protect sleep, you can count on their sometimes disturbing it; if dream hallucination sometimes serves a *plausible* end (imagined wish fulfilment), count on its doing the opposite as well. There is no "dynamic theory of dreams".'⁹

The fundamental reason why Wittgenstein condemns Frazer's explanations is not that they are false or at any rate highly contestable. It is simply that they are explanations, and that the explanation serves to prevent us seeing what should really attract our attention. In a remark from 1941, Wittgenstein says 'People who are constantly asking "why" are like tourists, who stand in front of a building reading Baedeker, & through reading about

⁷ See G. E. Moore, 'Wittgenstein's Lectures, 1930-33', in Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), p. 315.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*' [Part I, 1931; Part II, c. 1948; first published in *Synthese* 1967], transl. by J. Beversluis in C. G. Luckhardt (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), Part I, p. 64.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, from MS 137 (1948), in *Culture and Value* [*Vermischte Bemerkungen*], trans. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn 1998), p. 82c.

the history of the building's construction etc etc are prevented from *seeing* it'.¹⁰ This is quite close to what one might criticize Frazer for having done: his desire to find a causal explanation for what he is describing has simply made him blind to precisely those features that are, in Wittgenstein's view, the most significant ones.

In his account of the ceremony of the scapegoat, Frazer observes that 'it arises from a very obvious confusion between the . . . the material and the immaterial. Because it is possible to shift a load of wood, stones, or what not, from our own back to the back of another, the savage fancies that it is equally possible to shift the burden of his pains and sorrows to another, who will suffer them in his stead'.¹¹ The conception of transferring evil in this fashion is regarded as a gross error, and the practice is accordingly condemned as 'ignoble and foolish'. The spurious superiority of Frazer on this point is due to what Wittgenstein interprets as a typically modernist form of blindness to the symbolic function of the ceremony: 'People who call themselves Modernists are the most deceived of all. I will tell you what Modernism is like: in *The Brothers Karamazov* the old father says that the monks in the nearby monastery believe that the devils have hooks to pull people down to Hell. "Now," says the old father, "I can't believe in those hooks." That is the same sort of mistake the Modernists make when they misunderstand the nature of symbolism.'¹²

In his account of Wittgenstein's lectures during the years 1930–33, Moore notes that one of the principal points he wanted to underline regarding Frazer was

that it was a mistake to suppose that why, e.g. the account of the Beltane Festival 'impresses us so much' is because it has 'developed from a festival in which a real man was burnt'. He accused Frazer of thinking that this was the reason. He said that our perplexity about the reason why we are so impressed is not diminished by being informed of the *causes* giving rise to the festival, but it is diminished by the discovery of similar festivals: finding the latter can make the festival appear something 'natural', whereas this cannot happen merely as a result of being told about its causes. In this connection, Wittgenstein

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, MS 124 (1941), in *Culture and Value*, p. 46e.

¹¹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Ch. LV, §1, p. 539.

¹² Drury, *Conversations with Wittgenstein*, in Rees (ed.), *Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections*, p. 122.

said that the question 'Why does this make such an impression on us?' is analogous to questions in aesthetics such as 'Why is this beautiful?' or 'Why won't this bass do?'¹³

Wittgenstein describes the explanations given by Freud as precisely 'aesthetic' in this sense, and takes issue with him for mistakenly presenting them as scientific explanations of a causal type.

The question 'What is the nature of a joke?' is like the question 'What is the nature of a lyric poem?' I wish to examine in what way Freud's theory is a hypothesis and in what way not. The hypothetical part of this theory, the subconscious, is the part which is not satisfactory. Freud thinks it part of the essential mechanism of a joke to conceal something, say, a desire to slander someone, and thereby to make it possible for the subconscious to express itself. He says that people who deny the subconscious really cannot cope with post-hypnotic suggestion, or with waking up at an unusual hour of one's own accord. When we laugh without knowing why, Freud claims that by psychoanalysis we can find out. I see a muddle here between a cause and a reason. Being clear why you laugh is not being clear about a *cause*. If it were, then agreement to the analysis given of the joke as explaining why you laugh would not be a means of detecting it. The success of the analysis is supposed to be shown by the person's agreement. There is nothing corresponding to this in physics. Of course we *can* give *causes* for our laughter but whether those are in fact the causes is not shown by the person's agreeing that they are. A cause is found experimentally. The psychoanalytic way of finding why a person laughs is analogous to an aesthetic investigation. For the correctness of an aesthetic analysis must be agreement of the person to whom the analysis is given. The difference between a reason and a cause is brought out as follows: the investigation of a reason entails as an essential part one's agreement with it, whereas the investigation of a cause is carried out experimentally.¹⁴

In the same way, Wittgenstein maintains that the explanation of the very special impression made on us by seeing or hearing a

¹³ Moore, 'Wittgenstein's Lecture in 1930-33' in *Philosophical Papers*, p. 315.

¹⁴ From Alice Ambrose's notes on Wittgenstein's lectures in 1932-3, in A. Ambrose (ed.), *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932-35*, pp. 39-40.