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REMARKS ON WITTGENSTEIN'S 'REMARKS ON FRAZER'S THE GOLDEN BOUGH'

PHILIP DAVIES

A Malaysian native collects the nail-pairings, hair-clippings and spittle of his enemy, and with some beeswax he moulds them into the little figure of a man. For six successive nights he scorches it in a fire, all the while chanting, "It is not wax that I am scorching; it is the liver, heart and spleen of So-and-so that I scorch." On the seventh night he lets the fire consume the wax entirely. When asked what he is about, he replies that he wants his enemy to suffer and die. What are we to make of this strange and morbid ceremony, and of the native's reply to our enquiry? Sir James Frazer offers an explanation that sees in this practice an analogue to the applied natural sciences of our own culture. He argues that this moulding and burning of the little figure is simply an alternative to what we would consider more obvious ways of ridding oneself of an enemy, such as roasting him over a fire for seven successive nights or sticking his body with knives. What such a practice presupposes is a theory about the hidden causal connections that lie beneath the surface of nature. That there is a regular and impersonal order in nature in terms of which all the apparent chaos of phenomena can be accounted for, this belief is common to the outlooks of both 'savage' magician and modern natural scientist. Where the two diverge is in respect of the kind of causal connections they assert are to be found in nature. Unlike his modern counterpart, whose hypotheses are established upon a close observation of the way nature really does operate, the magician posits two types of causal connection which he fails to submit sufficiently to the test of experience. The first type is found in what Frazer calls 'homeopathic' magic; the principle here is that 'like produces like' (so that if rain is desired one thumps around and sprinkles everyone with water). The second is found in 'contagious' magic; here the idea is that whatever has been in contact with something provides a handle for manipulating it (to destroy one's enemy one should burn or mutilate some article of clothing or some detritus taken from his house). What we have here are "two different misapplications of the association of ideas. Homeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by similarity; contagious magic is founded on the association of ideas by contiguity."¹ A victim of a confusion of the order of thought with the order of reality, the magician employs a theory of the causal mechanisms of nature that can effect nothing of what he intends. The reason why it takes so long for men to reject such futile hypotheses is two-fold: first, it is unfortunately the case that it requires a long course of trial by experience before they come to see the falsity of hypotheses so fundamental to their practices; second, in the majority of cases the event desired is of such a sort that it is bound to occur, sooner or later, after the performance of the magical rite (the wind will always blow, the rain fall, one's enemy die, at some time or other).

In addition, Frazer offers an account of the evolution of man's inquiry into the structure of nature, an account of the progress of human understanding. This has three distinct phases which, though occasionally overlapping in transitional periods, are on the whole mutually exclusive. First is the

magical phase; nature is viewed as an impersonal and ordered whole structured by certain laws, the character of which is, unfortunately, totally misconceived. With the passage of hundreds of years men realise what fools they have been; magic doesn't work after all. Then comes the phase of religion; the controlling powers of nature are spirits whom one must plead with and placate in order to achieve one's purpose. Again, with time, the inefficacy of the practices based on this hypothesis is apparent to all honest men. Thereupon dawns the third phase, that of science. Returning to what was true in magic, that in nature is to be found an impersonal causal sequence, the men of science formulate hypotheses as to what are the mechanisms in nature, taking care to subject these to a rigorous and controlled series of empirical tests. That magic is the historically earliest form of inquiry is said by Frazer to follow from the fact that the simpler idea, that of impersonal and lawful forces, must evidently be grasped before the more complex, that of personal and capricious spirits. Each phase is a necessary one in the development of man.

With this outline accomplished it is time to consider what seemingly fatal criticisms Wittgenstein has to offer.

Frazer, in Wittgenstein's estimation, suffers from a disease characteristic of a culture whose patterns of thinking are critically influenced by the methodology of natural science, the mania for explanation. If we construe all forms of understanding and all uses of language on the model of scientific practice then we arrive at the approach of Frazer. On this account, there is but one way in which natural phenomena can be meaningful for man and there is but one use of language, the representation of that meaning which is the unitary structure behind the particoloured façade of nature. In order to survive man needs to be able to manipulate natural processes at will, and to this end he must build up a picture of the hidden causal connections that determine natural processes, and this picture must take the form of a system of empirically cashable explanatory hypotheses. Like the 'savage' scientist of his book Frazer stands before the variety of social phenomena and seeks to understand them by constructing explanatory hypotheses, weighing up one against another to see which makes best sense of the material. He aims at disclosing those erroneous beliefs that mislead 'the savage' to engage in such blatantly futile attempts at manipulating the natural world, in the same way as the scientist treats his data by moving behind the phenomena to the hidden causal nexus in order to achieve that satisfaction which is characteristic of understanding. But it is this very confusion of natural and social realities that is the source of Frazer's error; analogous to the scientist's professional commitment to revealing the rational structure of nature, Frazer is determined to disclose the network of beliefs that justifies magical practice. Throughout his later philosophy Wittgenstein fought a running battle with the interminable search for justification, arguing instead that all demands for explanation or justification must terminate in the facts of socially determined habit: 'If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."'²

At the foundation of the more complex forms of social activity are the elemental language-games, the habitual

forms of symbolic activity that are the given features of any form of social life; particular explanations or justifications are only possible by virtue of these language-games which collectively describe the limit of the world of the agents whose games they are. Thus it is senseless to ask for explanation or justification of those features of human life (including the language-games of justification and explanation) that are collectively the precondition for such rational activities. 'Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as "proto-phenomenon". That is, where we ought to have said: This language-game is played.'³ The scientist's activity is possible only on the condition of his membership of a social institution incorporating such elemental language-games, and he is in no position to criticise kinds of activity that are grounded on different sets of language-games. And Wittgenstein is asking us to accept the magical rites of primitive society as language-games analogous to ones that we are all familiar with from our own social experience. (It should be said that what Wittgenstein is offering in his account of language is not a theory of meaning; indeed, he rejected the notion that it was any part of the business of philosophy to construct theories to be tested against the facts. Instead, what he offers are a series of sketches designed to draw attention to the very diverse ways in which language is actually employed. And my talk of 'elemental language-games' is an attempt to summarise what it is that these sketches show to be the dominant features of our linguistic landscape.)

With his scientific model Frazer produces a most bizarre picture of primitive life, the key feature of which is gross stupidity. The proto-scientists of Frazer's account share the modern scientists' assumption that a causal system of impersonal laws regulates nature, but unfortunately, through confusing the succession of ideas with the succession of natural phenomena, the 'savage' is systematically mistaken in the causal connections he posits. 'But,' objects Wittgenstein, 'it never becomes plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity.'⁴ Frazer's attempt to show just how difficult it can be to locate the error in magical practices, by pointing out the inevitable eventuality of the natural occurrences whose instigation is the aim of magic, does nothing to mitigate this picture of primeval idiocy. 'Frazer says it is very difficult to discover the error in magic and this is why it persists for so long – because, for example, a ceremony which is supposed to bring rain is sure to appear effective sooner or later. But then it is queer that people do not notice sooner that it does rain sooner or later anyway.'⁵ And if we accept magic as a misbegotten technical device for manipulating nature how do we account for the high degree of technology, requiring a well developed understanding of the actual causal connections, the 'savage' exhibits in other areas of his social life? 'The same savage,' comments Wittgenstein, 'who apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.'⁶ Frazer's characterisation of these practices becomes still more untenable when we reflect that, for instance, the 'savage' makes no attempt to utilise the power that the rain-king and the rain-festival are presumed to have over the rain clouds so as to bring water to the parched soil in the periods of drought. One finds the rain festival only at the beginning of the rainy season. No such attempt is made because no such power is presumed. Again, the disanalogies between

science and magic become still more apparent when we consider the open and progressive character of experimental science; there is nothing parallel in the ritual practices to the successive framing and testing of hypotheses that is frequently held to be of the essence of modern science and the source of all that is valuable in it.

Frazer is doubly mistaken when he grounds the primitive comprehension in individual psychology; in neither science nor magic is it conceivable that the lone individual, from his observation of phenomena, spins theories out of his head according to which he proceeds to go to work on nature. Both scientist and magician presuppose in their work the presence of a communication community which constitutes the environment of meaning in which their activities can be read as 'observing', 'constructing hypotheses' and 'conducting instrumental tests' or as 'invoking a spirit to bring rain'. For the individual the kind of understanding of the world he is to live and work by is already given as embodied in the social institutions he is either born or educated into. However we are to understand magical rites it is impossible to view them as the handiwork of individuals working from the isolation of their own psyches; the meaning these rites possess is, as with the meaning of any form of behaviour, intersubjectively determined. Hence Wittgenstein says that he could imagine that if he were to invent a rite it would either fall into disuse with his death or be appropriated by his society in terms alien to his original intentions. He does not enlarge upon this in his remarks on Frazer but his later writings suggest that this notion of inventing a ritual presupposes a familiarity with the concept of ritual behaviour which the inventor has only because he belongs to a community in which talk of ritual as such has a place. It is an incoherent idea that an individual should invent an entirely distinct form of intentional behaviour unrelated to existing social practices, for the character of a form of behaviour as intentional is a function of its social setting whereas the suggestion has it that the practice has meaning, bestowed upon it by its inventor, and is then foisted upon a community for its use.

So how are we to understand magical practices and beliefs? The first thing is to disabuse ourselves of the idea that behind them is some general body of theory. One would only be justified in accusing the primitive magician of error if he was offering an opinion about what sort of states of affairs obtain in the world. But the beliefs we find associated with the practices are not a justification of these, they assert nothing and, accordingly, possess no truth value. They are as ritual in character as the non-verbal activities with which they are associated; whatever gave rise to the practice also gave rise to the belief, for they are but two different, though equivalent, symbols. (And one must be wary of the tendency to think of symbols as the man-made substitutes for some independent reality; symbols, or language, may be used to refer to some feature of reality but there are many other uses of languages besides the referential. Frazer fell victim to the scientific prejudice that takes the paradigmatic use of language to be the picturing of reality; so too did the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* who also made the further mistake of assuming that there is only one way of picturing. 'When he explains to us, for example, that the king must be killed in his prime because, according to the notions of savages, his soul would not be kept fresh otherwise, we can only say: where that practice and these

views go together, the practice does not spring from the view, but both of them are there.⁷ Wittgenstein invites us to see the life of the king of the wood at Nemi as another way of expressing what we mean by the phrase 'the majesty of death'; at most, explanation of such ritual may take the form of substituting a familiar symbol for the one that is new and strange to us. Yet the beliefs that accompany the practices are not without meaning in the way that one might say the rhymes accompanying a children's game are. In the case of the latter the significance of the rhymes lies entirely in the role they play in the game in question; their use in any one context is entirely independent of the use that might be made of them in any other. They are specimens of moves in a game rather than of language. However, the significance of the beliefs depends upon the use made of them not only in this or that, but in a wide range of contexts; to understand their meaning (something of which it is senseless to speak in connection with the rhymes) is to see the whole network of interrelated practices in which they are implicated. Thus unlike the rhymes it makes sense to regard them as forms of language rather than as rhythmic sound, empty of all conceptual content.

The correct point of departure for understanding these practices is the recognition of those features of our own social life that are their analogues. Wittgenstein cites the practices of burning in effigy, kissing the picture or name of the loved one, and the way Schubert's brother 'cut certain of Schubert's scores into small pieces and gave to his favourite pupils these pieces of a few bars each' as a sign of piety. The ceremonial figures so prominently in our own lives that we have no difficulty in thinking up possible ritual practices. 'Just how misleading Frazer's accounts are, we see, I think, from the fact that one could well imagine primitive practices oneself and it would only be by chance if they were not actually to be found somewhere. That is, the principle according to which these practices are ordered is much more general than Frazer shows it to be and we find it in ourselves.'¹⁰ When he attempts to translate practices Frazer has constant recourse to such terms as 'soul', 'shade' and 'ghost' with which he correctly assumes we are entirely familiar. The centrality of such language to 'civilised' discourse (the dialectical materialist is not being inconsistent when he gives vent to his feelings by saying that he fears the wrath of the gods) shows that we have far more in common with these primitive societies than Frazer would have us believe. And what we have in common is not stupidity, for ordinary use of these 'mythological' terms does not commit the user to belief in supernatural beings and the malevolent influence on human affairs of occult forces. Then what is the point of such practices? This could be a dangerous question, for we are tempted to think of the agents having some purpose in mind and then, on the basis of beliefs about the best means to achieve that, developing these customs. In a sense the practice, for instance, of kissing the picture of the loved one 'aims at some satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and feel satisfied.'¹¹ We act first and only then, on reflection, come to see some point in our action. These elemental modes of behaviour are the given in social life, and far from it being the case that some theoretical understanding generates these, the construction of explanatory hypotheses necessary for the development of such a theoretical understanding is itself one of these given social habits. In its own way the enterprise of explanation aims at some kind of

satisfaction, that satisfaction we call understanding. But the forms of satisfaction appropriate to some modes of behaviour are not appropriate to others; 'for someone broken up by love an explanatory hypothesis won't help much – it will not bring peace.'¹²

Having raised the point that the task of explanation is itself motivated by a need to quell some inner turmoil, to achieve a state of satisfaction, we can now turn to Frazer's work and ask whether his explanatory hypotheses have anything to do with the satisfaction, that is, the sense of understanding however small, that comes with reading his descriptions of these practices. I have already noted the absurdity of the picture his explanations generate. Before venturing on to Wittgenstein's account of the source of this satisfaction that accrues merely from a contemplation of the data of primitive life, I would like to expand upon the redundancy of Frazer's hypotheses. Our response to the descriptions of ritual seem too strong and certain to be related to the explanatory power of the hypothesis and the historical evidence that may be available to back it up. When faced with one of these rituals in my own society I am struck by a depth it seems to possess and give spontaneous voice to this by saying, 'This practice is obviously age-old,' and this impression persists irrespective of the historian's hypothetical reconstruction of its origins. The key to understanding is our impression untutored by hypotheses; explanations are as little necessary as a fifth wheel on an automobile. By adopting the heuristic tools of the natural scientist Frazer also embraces his methodological ignorance in face of the shifting phenomena of the reality he wishes to explain. The rough and ready understanding of nature with which the scientist begins his researches is precisely what he aims to depart from. In his most characteristic work an understanding of the kind of entities the scientist is observing requires a prior mastery of the conceptual framework that forms the background facilitating his highly specialised research; correct identification, for instance, of electrons will imply a working knowledge of the body of established physical theory. Only on the basis of such a body of theory are entities of this sort available for inspection. This approach inverts the understanding necessary when considering social reality. Generally speaking, sociological theories are only comprehensible because one already has a practical understanding of the kind of relations and entities they are talking about; the understanding of social reality given with one's life as a social animal is not to be given up in favour of empirically tested theory, rather it is the criterion for assessing the adequacy of any account of society. The reason for this lies in the fact that social phenomena, unlike natural phenomena, do not exist independent of man's conception of them. It is senseless to suggest that men could have been obeying and giving orders, for example, long before they had any idea of such a form of activity. It is impossible to work from a ground of methodological ignorance towards an understanding of human behaviour as intentional, for the precondition for this behaviour being available for our attention is that very recognition of its intentional character; our identification of some form of behaviour as human is at one and the same time an understanding of its meaning. By treating social reality as analogous to natural reality Frazer is forced to give up his initial understanding that is implied in his identification of certain forms of behaviour as ritual, in favour of understanding grounded on explanatory hypotheses; consequently

he misses that wherein these practices are distinctive and misdescribes them, as proto-scientific.

Where Frazer wishes to cultivate his puzzlement as the point of departure for rendering intelligible, Wittgenstein wants to focus on the significance of our unreflective response to these customs. This response is itself a rudimentary understanding; what accounts of these practices should aim at is making explicit the understanding we already possess. The feeling of depth that these forms of behaviour convey to us is the key, and it is something that we bring to our contemplation of the material. 'No, this deep and sinister aspect is not obvious from learning the history of the external action, but we impute it from an experience in ourselves.'¹³ It is only because we impute something from our own experience that we recognise those acts as meaningful, that is, see them for what they are; 'that which I see in those stories is something they acquire, after all, from the evidence, including such evidence as does not seem directly connected with them – from the thought of man and his past, from the strangeness of what I see in myself and in others, what I have seen and heard.'¹⁴ Our self-involvement in understanding these practices means that elucidation of this understanding takes the form of indicating what features of human life make such things as understanding and meaning possible, for Wittgenstein has changed the question from 'How can we come to understand?' into 'How is it that we do understand?' An account of the conditions of meaning would have to start with the existence of a language-using community whose members agree in their use of language at a pre-theoretical level, and the given social habits that enable the man whose social life is constituted by these to mean something by his manipulation of sounds and gestures. What we bring with us is our membership of such a community.

It follows that the meaning of a particular custom is the part it plays in a form of social life. This is why Wittgenstein speaks of the 'environment of a way of acting'¹⁵ which is also the inner nature of a practice. 'When I speak of the inner nature of the practice I mean all those circumstances in which it is carried out that are not included in the account of the festival, because they consist not so much in particular actions which characterise it, but rather in what we might call the spirit of people that take part, their way of behaviour at other times i.e. their character, and the other kinds of game that they play.'¹⁶ If the meaning of these practices is a function of the meaning of the form of life in which they are embedded, then our understanding of them is at one and the same time an understanding of the sense this community makes of its life as a whole. Accordingly the kind of problems we run up against here are analogous not to those of the natural scientist but to those that face the man confronted by an alien language. 'What we have in the ancient rites,' says Wittgenstein 'is the practice of a highly-cultivated gesture language.'¹⁷ Here the goal of satisfaction results from the translation of meaning from a foreign idiom into one with which we are familiar. And in so far as it is nonsense to elevate one language above another as superior in an absolute sense, so the world-view of another society, the way in which it makes sense of itself and the natural world, implied by its form of social life, is no worse and no better than our own. 'We might say "every view has its charm," but this would be wrong. What is true is that every view is significant for him who sees it so (but that does not mean "sees it as something other than it is"). And in this sense every view is equally significant.'¹⁸

These remarks about the incommensurability of ways of seeing have repercussions for Frazer's evolutionism. The ways in which we feel most comfortable in rendering something intelligible in large measure reflect our habitual ways of seeing, and the characteristic structure of our perception of reality determines, though not completely, the form our world possesses. There are no privileged ways of seeing that reveal the true essence of reality, for all human experience is in its very nature a 'seeing-as' the particular form of which represents the general character of reality. (However, our picture of the world is not entirely the work of human 'seeing-as'; to avoid the incoherences that extreme relativism entails one must allow something that acts as an independent check on that picture. That there is this something is essential to the concept of reality, a concept that is a *sine qua non* of language.) Thus, if Frazer employs the historical evolutionary model as a way of achieving satisfaction it is because this way of arranging the data of the field under scrutiny is the one he finds most perspicuous; that is to say, this arrangement makes it easiest for him to move from one piece of data to another without headache, which is what seeing the way things are connected or related amounts to. As a demonstration of formal connections without ontological implications Frazer's methodology could be helpful. But he goes further and offers his evolutionism as an account of the historical genesis and relations of science, magic and religion. This is to do precisely what he accuses his 'savage' scientist of doing, namely, confusing the order of thought with the order of reality. To demonstrate the formal relation between an ellipse and a circle is not to assert that at some time or other a particular ellipse actually evolved from a particular circle.

What we are faced with in these rites are language-games that are the component parts of a particular form of life. Outside of some set or other of such language-games the intentional behaviour that is distinctively human is impossible. That men find phenomena meaningful to them is not a contingent fact that needs explaining, but a grammatical remark; 'it is precisely the characteristic feature of the awakening human spirit that a phenomenon has meaning for it.'¹⁹ The ways in which meaning can be found are as diverse as the forms of activity in which men engage. But no one of these ways, the scientific for example, can be made normative. All we need do in understanding primitive societies is to carry out that careful description of the reality made available for our attention on the basis of our own experience as beings who engage in meaningful activity, and the kind of satisfaction we require will come to us simply from looking. 'We can only describe and say, human life is like that.'²⁰

1. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Macmillan 1978 p. 15
2. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, 1978 sec. 217
3. *ibid.* sec. 654
4. L. Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, p. 1
5. *ibid.* p. 2
6. *ibid.* p. 4

7. *ibid* pp. 1 - 2
8. The ostensible purpose of Frazer's book is to throw light on the puzzling and barbaric rites associated in antiquity with the sacred grove of Diana at Nemi, rites involving the slaughter of the goddess's priest, known during his term of office as the king of the wood.
9. L. Wittgenstien. 'Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*' p. 5
10. *ibid.* p. 5
11. *ibid.* p. 4
12. *ibid.* p. 3
13. *ibid.* p. 16
14. *ibid.* p. 18
15. *ibid.* p. 16
16. *ibid.* p. 14
17. *ibid.* p. 10
18. *ibid.* p. 11
19. *ibid.* p. 7
20. *ibid.* p. 3

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