

5-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

DeSmith, Felicia (2005) "Frazer, Wittgenstein and the Interpretation of Ritual Practice," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol14/iss1/6>

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Frazer, Wittgenstein and the Interpretation of Ritual Practice

Felicia DeSmith

Frazer and Wittgenstein, anthropologist and philosopher, are two thinkers whose works have profoundly shaped the development of their respective fields in the 20th Century. The difference between them is that Frazer's work is now widely dismissed, even ridiculed, while Wittgenstein's ideas, such as language games, are still a strong part of the philosophical endeavor. This fact is made interesting by the intersection of the works of these two. Though his thoughts were not published until 1979,¹ Wittgenstein began to comment on the faults in Frazer's works as early as 1931,² specifically upon his presentation of ritual practice among 'primitive' peoples as foolish and mistaken. To Wittgenstein and many other modern thinkers, this patent dismissal of ritual practice was troubling and needed to be corrected. Wittgenstein gives us a good starting place to understand the significance of ritual practice, but to accomplish it, one must go beyond his explanation in the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*.

In this paper, I will discuss Frazer's introduction of ritual practice as bad science, Wittgenstein's textual response to Frazer, and the common view of Wittgenstein's response held by his commentators. I will argue that Wittgenstein's later view needs to be

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough. Retford: Brynmill Press Limited, 1979.

² 1931 is an important date for understanding Wittgenstein's thought in the *Remarks*. It falls between the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). It is in the *Remarks* that we begin to see the transformation of his ideas toward the form in which they appear in the *Investigations*.

incorporated into the discussion, and expanded and clarified to truly show the reason for the persistent misunderstanding of ritual practice.

Frazer

James Frazer was an anthropologist of the Victorian era, very much a product of British colonial imperialist thought. His major accomplishment is *The Golden Bough*, a 13 volume anthropological work, published over the years of 1890 to 1936, which describes ‘primitive’ magico-religious, or ritual practice and attempts to find overlying archetypes of thought and evolution. Most importantly, Frazer attempts to use his findings to support an evolutionary theory of culture, that is, the theory that so-called ‘primitive’ religious thought can give modern thinkers an insight into the developmental history of their own culture and into the nature of religious belief (that is, its erroneousess).

To this end, Frazer identifies ritual practice as a scientific endeavor, the initial groping of a primitive culture towards the understanding and certitude that science provides. It is a clumsy prototype, a (perhaps necessary) precursor to the finished product that is rigorous scientific methodology. Frazer says of magical practice, “its fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature.”³ For Frazer, and for the purposes of this paper, science is defined as an exploratory activity based on empirical reasoning to try to explain, manipulate and control the properties of the world.

³ Frazer, J. G. *The Golden Bough* (abridged edition). London: Macmillan, 1922. 49.

The reason that ritual practice is the prototype of science, and not, according to Frazer, science itself, is that it is based on a fundamental error.

“The fatal flaw of magic lies not in its general assumption of a sequence of events determined by law, but in its total misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that sequence.”⁴

“Legitimately applied they yield science; illegitimately applied they yield magic, the bastard sister of science. It is therefore a truism, almost a tautology, to say that all magic is necessarily false and barren; for if it were ever to become true and fruitful, it would no longer be magic, but science.”⁵

For Frazer, ritual practitioners are stricken with a basic misunderstanding of the practical principles that govern reality. The reasoning that supports the ritual structure is faulty; it is a mistake. And, working from a faulty beginning, the end is faulty as well, forever consigning magic to be that false and barren bastard sister of science.

Wittgenstein

Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* is a two-part work. The first part was written between 1930 and 1931 after his first contact with *The Golden Bough* in the summer of 1930. These remarks were dictated to a typist and much rearranged, seemingly as a kind of starting point for thought about his major later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*. The second set of remarks is quite fragmentary, actually rough notes and penciled scribbles found among his

⁴ Ibid. 49.

⁵ Ibid. 49-50.

things posthumously by Elizabeth Anscombe, one of Wittgenstein's literary executors, a translator and a commentator. They appear to be meant as insertions to his earlier remarks.⁶ In the first part of the *Remarks*, one can definitely see the beginnings of some of the ideas that will characterize his later view.

As a first step, Wittgenstein rejects Frazer's notion that magico-religious practice is founded on a basic mistake in reasoning, essentially a kind of persistent stupidity, where the ritual practitioner insists on the correctness of his action in spite of its direct contradiction by the nature of reality. Wittgenstein writes:

"Frazer's account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as mistakes."⁷

"It is very queer that all these practices are finally presented, so to speak, as stupid actions.

But never does it become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity."⁸

"Frazer says it is very difficult to discover the error in magic and this is why it persist 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."⁹

The source of the strangeness of Frazer's account, for Wittgenstein, is that magical and religious activity is defined by its erroneousness, and a ritual practitioner would have to be stupid to continue on practicing.

⁶ Rhees, Rush. Introduction. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough. By Ludwig Wittgenstein. Retford: Brynmill Press Limited, 1979. v-vi.

⁷ Wittgenstein. 1979. 1.

⁸ Ibid. 1.

⁹ Ibid. 2.

At any rate, Wittgenstein goes on to point out that ritual practitioners, or ‘savages,’ have a clear understanding of what science is and what it should be used for, and they separate it from the things that should be addressed by ritual.

“The same savage 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.”¹⁰

This is to say, where science is needed, science is used. And it is used correctly. Only when there is some need to accomplish or comment on something beyond the bounds of science, do men turn to magico-religious practices.

This rejection of ritual practice as a purely scientific endeavor, as well as some of his comments in the *Remarks*¹¹ have led some of Wittgenstein’s commentators to characterize his position in the *Remarks* to be a new and complete theory of religion: an expressivist theory. According to Brian Clack, “(b)oth Michael Banner and John Cook see the distinctive feature of Wittgenstein’s approach to religious phenomena as being the idea that such rites ‘express attitudes’ towards things: towards the world, one’s own life and death, and so on.”¹² In the expressivist interpretation of Wittgenstein’s *Remarks*, magico-religious and ritual practice is in no way an attempt to accomplish something based on the rules of nature, nor to explore some kind of speculation or

¹⁰ Ibid. 4.

¹¹ Such as, “... magic does give representation to a wish; it expresses a wish.” Ibid. 4.

¹² Clack, Brian. *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. 28.

theory about those same rules, but simply to express an emotion or stance on the human condition.

I disagree completely with this analysis of Wittgenstein's position in the *Remarks*. It shows a shallow understanding of some of his more problematic notes. This can be illustrated by a remark and its footnote:

“If the adoption of a child is carried out by the mother pulling the child from beneath her clothes, then it is crazy to think that there is an *error* in this and that she believes she has borne the child. *”¹³

* “The same principle of make-believe, so dear to children, has led other peoples to employ a simulation of birth as a form of adoption. ... A woman will take a boy whom she intends to adopt and push or pull him through her clothes; ever afterwards he is regarded as her very son...” (*The Golden Bough*, pp. 14, 15)¹⁴

In this case, if we just read the remark itself, one can see the idea the expressivists are arguing from. The woman does not believe that she has born the child, but it is the case that she has shown something, that is her intent to adopt the child and her commitment to provide for him. At this point in the *Remarks*, it seems that Wittgenstein considers the matter closed, making no more explicit commentary about this particular case, and moves on to his next example.

But if we look also at the note Wittgenstein includes from *The Golden Bough*, the expressivist analysis of that action becomes complicated. In not taking Wittgenstein's remark as a direct response to a statement of Frazer's, the commentators are missing a vital piece of the puzzle. It is not just that the woman indicates that she wishes to adopt the boy, it is that

¹³ Wittgenstein, 1979. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid. 4, footnote.

through the performance of that ritual, the boy has become ‘as her very son.’ A change has occurred both in the social structure of the group and in the nature of the relationship between the woman and the boy. Their bond has been altered and cemented. It is clear that the ritual was undertaken in order to accomplish something, that is, the change in the relationship between them.

In general, in rituals that resemble the one above in their form and intent, the ritual practitioners not only have a very clear idea of what they want to accomplish, they also have a very clear idea of how it comes about. By performing a symbolic birth, the adoptive mother is seeking to effect a change on the symbolic attributes of herself and her adoptive son (i.e. their relationship to one another, both in a functional social way and in a meaningful, ‘ontological’ way; *he becomes her very son*). This change occurs on the basis of the understood properties and mechanics of the manipulation of symbolic attributes in much the same way a mathematician knows that induction works on the basis of the properties and mechanics of the set of natural numbers. The change or proof that we want to accomplish in either case is borne out because of the very nature of the mechanics that change operates on. In both cases, it must hold.

Critique of Wittgenstein’s *Remarks*

In my interpretation of Wittgenstein’s response to Frazer, Wittgenstein is trying to show that Frazer is confused in exactly the same way a philosopher becomes confused; moreover, in my analysis, to clear up this confusion is the agenda of Wittgenstein’s entire career. It is the single common element between the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. The aim of both is to show that the cause of philosophical torment is a specific sort of

confusion about what can be said, or about what can be evaluated in what contexts.

In order to properly get at this confusion, we need to be able to talk in terms of depth grammar. To do that, I need to turn to the *Philosophical Investigations*, first published in 1953, many years after the first remarks on Frazer were written, but which has much of its preparatory work in the *Remarks* itself. In section 664 of the former, Wittgenstein writes:

“In the use of words one might distinguish ‘surface grammar’ from ‘depth grammar.’ What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence, the part of its use—as it were—that can be taken in by the ear. And now compare the depth grammar, say, of the word “to mean,” with what its surface grammar would lead us to expect.”¹⁵

In other words, surface grammar is that which involves the rules of syntax that words have within a sentence and depth grammar is the meaning of an utterance within the language game to which it belongs. Moreover, depth grammars exist only as an attribute of the language game to which they belong; a depth grammar cannot exist separate from its context, its language game.

Philosophical confusion arises when one takes a language object, such as a noun or a verb (i.e. “God” or “to mean,” etc.), and tries to make sense of it on the basis of its surface grammar alone. Mere syntax does not reveal the meaning of a language object in its language game, nor does it even show to what language game the language object belongs. If we act in

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. 3rd Ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968. § 664.

ignorance of the proper context of a language object, then of course we become confused.

In order to understand the proper domain of a language game and the function of the language objects that belong to it, Wittgenstein proposes the idea of a perspicuous presentation. The word he uses in German is *übersicht*, a kind of complete, ultimate sight. Rhees notes that he only chooses this word in translation because there is no English word that means precisely what Wittgenstein means by *übersicht*. At that time, no one was using the word ‘perspicuous’ in English to have any specific connotations. I find that the fact that it was unsullied, lacking accretions, is what makes the idea intelligible to readers of English in the first place.¹⁶ *Übersicht* is also sometimes translated as ‘synoptic view’ or ‘bird’s eye view.’¹⁷ But what does this ‘ultimate sight’ see? What is its purpose? Wittgenstein attempts to explain in the *Remarks*:

“For us, the conception of a perspicuous presentation [a way of setting out the whole field together by making easy the passage from one part of it to another] is fundamental.”¹⁸

“This perspicuous presentation makes possible that understanding which consists just in the fact that we ‘see the connections.’”¹⁹

Nowhere, though, does Wittgenstein explain or name the object of *übersicht*, beyond saying that it allows us to “see the connections.”

Wittgenstein, in a sense, gives us two ways to look at the same thing, two ways of pointing at the heart of the matter that he never names or explicitly characterizes. On the one side, there are the language objects and their depth grammars. On the other side is

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, 1979. 9, translator’s note.

¹⁷ Clack, 1999. 58.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, 1979. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 9.

the comprehension of the connections between the elements of a language game. But what of the connections themselves? What is the thing that we understand? What is the thing that is made of the connections? In order to do what Wittgenstein wants to do with language, someone has to define and give an account of this thing. Wittgenstein never did because he wanted to avoid proposing some kind of unified theory, yet in order for his account of language to make sense, that thing needs to be rigorously explained. To give a clear view of this hidden concept is what I will now try to accomplish, though in doing so I will go beyond that which Wittgenstein himself explicitly stated.

To understand a language game, to have a clear perspicuous presentation of it, one must be aware of the connections between the elements of a language game. These elements are the language objects, their depth grammars, how they interrelate, how they function on one another, etc. It is to have an understanding of the complete combinatorial, permutational properties of the relationships of all the elements to one another. It is to understand the fundamental nature of the concepts of the language game and how they function within that language game. It could be called something like 'fundamental concept functionality.' It could also be called the metaphysics of a language game; though I hesitate to use that term, since the very property that made 'perspicuous' for Rhees a good candidate for specificity in philosophical terminology makes 'metaphysics' a very bad candidate for it. In philosophy, the term 'metaphysics' has become so overburdened with accretions that it cannot be applied to something so narrow and specific as what we are speaking about here. Though the power of the analogy cannot be denied, and it is useful to keep it in mind, I am going to attempt to use the unburdened new term

‘fundamental concept functionality’ where its unburdenedness does not complicate understanding.

The idea that the heart of a language game, its machine code, as it were, is a kind of cohered whole of the combinatorial relationships of the elements of that language game suggests to me a kind of taxonomy of language games, based on the shared elements of fundamental concept functionality between related language games. It is useful to think of language games themselves as being interrelated, by a sort of family resemblance model, into a loose framework that gives a picture of language as a whole. Since language cannot occur outside of a language game, all communication must share some basic element that makes each instance of communication able to be considered a part of a language game. All language must have a common aspect of its functional concept functionality in order for it to be language at all. This gives us the first tier in the taxonomy of language games, that is, language games themselves.

The second tier of the taxonomy would contain broad categories of types of language games, such as social interaction, science and religion. The second tier should make some distinctions between different domains of language activity, for even at this level, a degree of specificity and exclusion begins to arise. Though this taxonomic view is quite helpful in illustrating the different ways that language is divided up by its use, it is important to remember that the groupings occur because of shared elements of the ‘metaphysics’ of the language games involved. The spaces between the branches of the taxonomic tree represent ‘lines in the sand,’ across which language objects and concepts from specific language games should not (and cannot sensically) be transported.

Generally speaking, then, Frazer’s mistake is in taking ideas out of one language game and bringing

them into another, taking them out of the language game of religion and subjecting them to the 'metaphysics' of the science language game. He is violating a divide in the taxonomic organization. What he does, over and over again in the pages of *The Golden Bough*, is seize upon some idea or practice, loosen it from the tethers of meaning and significance that tie it into the use and function of the language game of ritual, and take it singularly into a strange environment where its original meaning and significance, its use and function, are no longer valid.

Specifically, the problem with Frazer's transportation of religious language objects into the science language game is that the science language game does not admit of an important aspect of the fundamental concept functionality of the religion or ritual language game. Above, when we looked at the example of adoption through the performance of a symbolic birth, we saw that the important part of the ritual is that the symbolic attributes of the mother and son were altered; that is, she became his very mother, and he became her very son. In magico-religious practice and ritual, the symbolic attributes of a person (i.e. 'is the son of,' 'is sinful,' 'is ritually pure,' etc.) are very important. In science, they are trivial. One cannot determine if a person is sinful using scientific implements, nor does it tell a scientist anything about the empirical properties of that person. In addition, the rules of the science language game do not acknowledge that through the manipulation of symbols, symbolic attributes can be changed.

This idea, so central to magico-religious and ritual practice, of the nontriviality of symbolic attributes and the ability of symbolic attributes to be altered through symbolic action (or performance) is something I am going to call 'symbolic causality.' It is the aspect of the fundamental concept functionality of the magico-

religious language game that allows for the relationships between symbols, symbolic attributes, and symbolic actions to be acted upon reliably, mechanically, in the same way, as I mention above, that inductive proofs work reliably, mechanically because of the relationships between the elements in the series of natural numbers.

Take for example, in Christianity, the transubstantiation of the host. In a scientific account of it, ritual participants listen as the ritual practitioner speaks some words, calling on his God to bless the food that is the center of the ritual. Then the participants eat some bread and drink some wine. And at the end of it, they believe that in some way they have partaken of the body of their savior. They have all pretended, like make-believe, that the wine became blood and that there is something salvific in the action of drinking it. But nothing empirical has changed, except that now they have eaten and drunk a bit. Yet anyone familiar with the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist knows that to dismiss it as make-believe is to completely misunderstand the point of the ritual. Most do not believe that the wine really, actually becomes blood, but they do believe that the wine has taken on the symbolic attributes of Christ's blood, being both his blood and just wine at the same time. In an inescapably analogous way, a woman does not believe that she actually gave birth to her adoptive son, but he is still her son. This fine distinction, empirically wine but symbolically blood, is not given any importance in the science language game, but it is of vital importance to the language game of Christianity.

Science does not admit of the validity of symbolic causality; in the fundamental concept functionality of science, it does not exist. Indeed, the very idea is in some ways anathema to the language game itself. Small wonder, then, that when Frazer tries

to make a scientific account of a ritual practice, he sees it as crazy and wrong. And small wonder that readers of Frazer who are sensitive to the differences between science and magic, like Wittgenstein, are frustrated constantly by his accounts because it is so gratingly apparent that he is missing something vital.

The way in which Frazer could have conducted his anthropological work without it being wrongheaded and disrespectful would be, instead of evaluating ritual thought and action in terms of science and trying to patch up 'savage' practice and make it appear rational, to have attempted to understand and describe the important aspects of ritual practice in their own terms. In light of the discussion in this paper, the proper aim of anthropology and religious studies²⁰ should be description, to understand and describe the fundamental concept functionality, the metaphysical properties, of a specific ritual language game by observing the thought and activity of ritual practitioners. The aim should be to provide Wittgenstein's *übersicht*, to provide a perspicuous presentation of what goes on and why, to prevent Frazer's kind of confusion and mischaracterization regarding the elements of ritual activity.

²⁰ And, according to Wittgenstein, the proper aim of philosophy as well.