

Wittgenstein on Frazer and Explanation

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In his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," Wittgenstein identifies at least two problems with Frazer's explanations for religious and magical practices. First, Frazer's explanations are implausible. Frazer regards them as nascent forms of contemporary science that reflect "faulty views" about physics, medicine, or technology (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 129). According to Wittgenstein, this is to treat these practices as "pieces of stupidity": "But it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all that out of sheer stupidity" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 119). Wittgenstein's second criticism would seem to have priority. He writes: "the very idea of wanting to explain a practice . . . seems wrong to me" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 119). However, some commentators have focused on the first criticism, and they find in Wittgenstein's remarks a more plausible account of religious and magical practices. Rather than the antecedents of contemporary science or technology, the practices examined by Frazer are elaborations on either expressive or instinctive behaviors. As expressive behaviors, magical practices, for example, do not attempt to effect some change in the natural world; they are expressions of wishes, desires, or other attitudes toward the world. Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting this view of magic when he writes that "magic brings a wish to representation; it expresses a wish" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 125; see, e.g., Hacker 1992, p. 286).¹ Other commentators have focused more on Wittgenstein's references to instinctive behavior within these remarks (e.g., Clack 1999; De Lara 2003). For example, Wittgenstein refers to "Instinct-actions" within an observation about the non-instrumental character of ritualistic actions (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 137). Elsewhere, he associates a ritual with an instinctive behavior (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 141). Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting in these places biological origins for religious and magical practices. Some supporters of the instinct reading have vigorously opposed the expressivist reading (e.g., Clack 1999 and 2003). However, both readings agree that, according to Wittgenstein, ritualistic actions are performed without regard to their utility. As such, they are misleadingly compared to modern technology or medicine. These readings also take Wittgenstein to be opposed to the view that these practices are manifestations of a primitive science, since—as Wittgenstein insists in several places—they should be not characterized in terms of the beliefs of their participants. He writes: "the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 129; see also p. 123 and 129). As such, they do not represent beliefs, whether true or false, about nature.

According to these interpretations, Wittgenstein's second criticism of Frazer amounts to the claim that the kind of explanation that Frazer offers is not appropriate for these practices. Since magical and religious practices are not based on beliefs about the world or anything else, they should not be explained in terms of their participants' beliefs. However, this is still to attribute to Wittgenstein an explanation for these practices. The explanation is

importantly different than the one Frazer offers; we can characterize it as a causal explanation as opposed to Frazer's intellectualist explanation. The causes that Wittgenstein is supposed to have identified for these practices preclude the interpolation of participants' beliefs in an explanation for their performance. The practices arise naturally out of certain instinctive or expressive behaviors of humans without the mediation of beliefs. But Wittgenstein's second criticism does not challenge the *type* of explanation that Frazer offers for these practices. Again, Wittgenstein says that there is something wrong with the "very idea of wanting to explain a practice." If we are to reconcile these two criticisms, some other purpose for Wittgenstein's discussions of expressive and instinctive behaviors needs to be found. This purpose must be something other than explaining religious and magical practices. Identifying this purpose will be my task in what follows.

P. M. S. Hacker offers some correct advice in dealing with Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer: "If one wants to learn from them, they should not be squeezed too hard" (Hacker 1992, p. 278). They were only slightly revised after their initial composition. Only the first part of them (MS 110) was preserved in a transcript (TS 221), and those remarks were subsequently dropped from a later version of that transcript (TS 213). The second part of the remarks comes from scraps of paper that were probably inserted by Wittgenstein into his copy of the abridged version of *The Golden Bough* (MS 143).² But while the remarks were not worked over like those collected in the *Philosophical Investigations*, they deserve some attention. They are about a book in which Wittgenstein had a serious interest (Drury 1981, pp. 134-5) and, if read properly, they can illuminate not only their subject but other areas of Wittgenstein's thought. The best strategy for approaching them is to read them in light of the more reliable records of Wittgenstein's thought. This strategy will warn us away from taking Wittgenstein to be offering in them his own explanation for religious and magical practices.

Wittgenstein famously asserts in the *Philosophical Investigations* that in philosophy "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (Wittgenstein 2001, §109). Explanations cannot remedy the confusions that generate philosophical problems. Instead of the novel information that an explanation provides, we require a better understanding of language or other practices in order to be relieved of our confusions. Wittgenstein's second criticism of Frazer seems to extend this admonition to our efforts to understand ancient and otherwise unfamiliar practices. But how can mere descriptions improve our understanding of alien practices? This depends on the type of deficiency in our understanding that we are trying to rectify. Wittgenstein understands Frazer's central problem to be the strangeness and unfamiliarity of certain religious and magical practices. Frazer is attempting to make sense of these practices. So, his question is less about *where* they came from, and more about *why* they are performed. The former can be answered without answering the latter. And

¹ While Hacker (1992) seems to endorse, at least in part, the expressivist interpretation, his understanding of Wittgenstein's use of "perspicuous representations" and developmental hypotheses in his remarks on Frazer is very close to mine. Paul Redding (1987) also provides a similar interpretation.

² See the editors' introduction to the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" for more information on their sources (pp. 115-117).

whereas the former question can be answered by uncovering new facts about the practices, the latter question requires a different kind of solution.

In attempting to explain these practices, by either revealing the beliefs of their practitioners or fitting them within a developmental hypothesis (a method of Frazer's that we will consider later), Frazer is succumbing to what Wittgenstein calls in these remarks the "the foolish superstition of our time" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 129), which is to believe that every puzzle can be remedied by a scientific explanation. In one of his transcripts, Wittgenstein identifies this as the "scientific way of thinking" and says:

What is disastrous about the scientific way of thinking (which today possesses the whole world) is that it wants to respond to any disquiet with an explanation. (TS 219, p. 8; author's translation)

The disquiet that Frazer suffers from, that which motivates him to seek an explanation for these practices, is caused by their strangeness and unfamiliarity. However, this cannot be remedied through an explanation. Instead, Wittgenstein says in these remarks, in a variation on his advice to philosophers, that "one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 121).

Wittgenstein uses a concept that plays an important role in his discussions of the treatment of philosophical problems to characterize the sort of description that can provide the desired understanding: "perspicuous representation" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 133). Such a representation will help us see that "there is also something in us which speaks in favor of those savages' behaviour" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 131). He provides an example of this in a passage that has been used to support both the expressivist and instinctive interpretations of his "Remarks on Frazer":

When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. "I am venting my anger". And all rites are of this kind. Such actions may be called Instinct-actions.—And an historical explanation, say, that I or any ancestors previously believe that beating the ground does help is shadow-boxing, for it is a superfluous assumption that explains *nothing*. The similarity of the action to an act of punishment is important, but nothing more than this similarity can be asserted.

Once such a phenomenon is brought into connection with an instinct which I myself possess, this is precisely the explanation wished for; that is, the explanation which resolves the particular difficulty. And a further investigation about the history of my instinct moves on another track. (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 137)

A description alone can reveal such a connection between an opaque practice and something I do. In doing this, it would satisfy Wittgenstein's criterion for a perspicuous representation:

This perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we "see the connections." Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*. (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 133)

That Wittgenstein puts the connection in terms of a shared "instinct" should not be taken as a commitment by him to some biological account of the origins of ritualistic practices. Such an account, as well as any version of the expressivist theory, would be as incapable as Frazer's explanations of making an alien practice seem less strange. Wittgenstein also says that an investigation of the instinct's history "moves on another track," suggesting that an exact characterization of it is irrelevant to the purposes served by its identification.

Instead of revealing the emotional or biological roots of ritualistic actions, Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to what he elsewhere calls the "common spirit" that underlies the practices being compared:

All these *different* practices show that it is not a question of the derivation of one from the other, but of a common spirit. And one could invent (devise) all these ceremonies oneself. And precisely that spirit from which one invented them would be their common spirit. (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 151)

It is only by recognizing the "common spirit" in which a practice is performed that it can be relieved of its strangeness. The recognition is not a matter of knowing certain facts about the practice, facts that an explanation can provide. Rather, it involves being able to occupy imaginatively the place of a participant in the other practice. Our ability to do this can be facilitated by a description of the practice that highlights a "common spirit" or "connecting link" between the alien practice and one in which we are already a participant. A description that is able to do this will provide the "satisfaction," as Wittgenstein puts it, that Frazer sought through his explanations:

I believe that the attempt to explain is already therefore wrong, because one must only correctly piece together what one *knows*, without adding anything, and the satisfaction being sought through the explanation follows of itself. (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 121)

If we fail to recognize the "common spirit" in which the practices are performed, then no amount of new information provided by an explanation will make the alien practice any less opaque.

Wittgenstein does admit a role for explanations in facilitating our understanding of alien practices. However, in serving this role they are importantly different than the explanations that Frazer offers (as well as those sometimes attributed to Wittgenstein). For example, in order to account for the sinister quality a contemporary spectator would discern in the Beltane Fire Festival, Frazer offers a developmental hypothesis for the ritual that locates its origins in human sacrifice. But this explanation's ability to increase our understanding of the practice does not depend upon the explanation's truth. As Wittgenstein explains:

The deep, the sinister, do not depend on the history of the practice having been like this, for perhaps it was not like this at all; nor on the fact that it was perhaps or probably like this, but rather on that which gives me grounds for assuming this. (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 147)

The explanation can function as a "perspicuous representation" of the practice that is able to highlight those features of it by which we can, as Wittgenstein puts it, discern its "connection with our own feelings and thoughts" (Witt-

genstein 1993, p. 143). In order to do this, the hypothesis about the practice's origins need not be true (it need not even be supposed to be true); it only needs to draw our attention to those aspects of the practice that are shared by ones in which we participate.

This is also the case with the developmental hypotheses identified in these remarks by the expressivist and instinctive interpretations. The purpose of these hypotheses is not to inform us about the origins of religious and magical practices, but to facilitate our understanding of these practices. This is the same function served by other hypotheses we find in Wittgenstein's writings, such as those that associate the development and acquisition of language with instinctive or "primitive" reactions (e.g., Wittgenstein 2001, §244). For Wittgenstein's purposes in these writings, the truth of these hypotheses is irrelevant. Instead, as he puts it, "the correct and interesting thing to say is not: this has arisen from that, but: it could have arisen this way" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 153). While their truth certainly makes a difference in other contexts, it does not make a difference to Wittgenstein's efforts to relieve us of certain confusions.

Literature

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References to Wittgenstein's unpublished writings follow von Wright's catalogue. The typescript (TS) or manuscript (MS) number is followed by page number(s).