

Wittgenstein On Myth, Ritual And Science

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I

Sir James George Frazer published the first volume of *The Golden Bough* in 1890. He didn't complete it until 1915. The book became so famous that Wittgenstein was interested in reading the book. According to Rush Rees, he never read the complete twelve volumes of the book, he received an abridged one-volume edition and made pencil notes on particular pages in this abbreviated version. What was his problem with Frazer's *Golden Bough*? Before going on into details of his reaction to Frazer's book, I will briefly summarize what Frazer says.

Frazer tells us stories about the beliefs of ancient people. His main concern is: what kind of path mankind followed in order to arrive at its present condition. He has a certain view regarding the development of human thought. In his writings he emphasizes the indisputable superiority and excellence of science over another systems of knowledge. Some of his comments on this issue include the idea that the hope of progress "-moral and intellectual as well as material- in the future is bound up with the fortunes of science, and that every obstacle placed in the way of scientific discovery is a wrong to humanity" (Frazer 1998 p.806). But, Frazer argues, this does not lead us to the belief that a scientific theory of the world is complete and final (Frazer 1998 p.806). His view of progress in science reminds us of Popper's "approximation to objective truth" because he thinks that the advance of knowledge is an "infinite progression towards a goal" and it is an "endless pursuit" (Frazer 1998 p.806).

Frazer correlates not only science but magic and religion with truth: "[i]n the last analysis magic, religion, and science are nothing but theories of truth" (Frazer 1998 p.806) and science, of course, will take the place of the others. He illustrates the relationship between science, religion and magic by a metaphor: there is a "web woven of three different threads -the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science" (Frazer 1998 p.807). According to Frazer, the evolution of thought from the beginning can be seen as a checker of black and white, which means true and false notions. In the beginning we cannot see the red thread of religion. But when we look at further along the fabric we will remark that "there rests on the middle portion of the web, where religion has entered deeply into its texture, a dark crimson

stain, which shades off insensibly into a lighter tint as the white thread of science is woven more and more into the tissue" (Frazer 1998 p.807).

Frazer's view can be summarized as follows: (i) Science has exceptional status (ii) Scientific knowledge approximates to objective truth (iii) Not only science, but also magic and religion are theories of truth (iv) Science is the most important candidate, which will take the place of the others because the others are false science. His view also implies that (v) The lives of our predecessors, and also our own are hypotheses, which can be proved to be wrong in the later stages (vi) Successive testing proves them to be wrong (vii) Error occurs in the search for truth (viii) Therefore, we should be tolerant towards previous hypotheses.

What was so disturbing about Frazer's thought that made Wittgenstein criticize him?

II

The first objection, implicit in his remarks, is about the methodology of social sciences. As later emphasized by Peter Winch in his book *The Idea of a Social Science* Wittgenstein contends that the methodology of social sciences should be different from that of natural sciences. This is one of the important continuities between his early and later thought. Both in the *Tractatus* and in the *Investigations* periods he asserts that while the methodology of natural sciences is explanatory, the methodology of social sciences, resembling his therapeutic understanding of philosophy, should be descriptive. One of the disturbing characteristics of Frazer's writings is his attempt to *explain* rituals, and the development of human thought. "Every explanation is after all an hypothesis" (Wittgenstein 1993 p.123) says Wittgenstein; he implies that life is not an hypothesis, hence it cannot be explained, but only described. Explanatory hypothesis will not help much when someone is upset because of love (Wittgenstein 1993 p.123). The evolutionary point of view is used by Frazer as a schema to explain the development of human thought. On this account, as a result of natural selection and elimination the most powerful point of view, which is the scientific point of view, will triumph in the end. From the metaphor of Frazer we understand that while magic is false, science is true. Magic and religion are false physics, false science, and false technology.

Wittgenstein is very much disturbed by Frazer's intellectualism. Frazer hints at the idea that when primitive man practices a ritual act he behaves as if he is a theoretician, who tries to control nature by means of magic. As the twentieth century anthropologist Gellner says, the primitive shaman is described by Frazer as "a fellow intellectual, an investigative scholar, but one who generally got it wrong" (Gellner 1999 p.117). According to Wittgenstein, on the other hand, an anthropologist should not consider

ritualistic actions to be wrong ideas about the physics of things: "[a]n error arises only when magic is interpreted scientifically" (Wittgenstein 1993 p.125). Presentation of magic and religion as false science is a distortion because religious practices are not errors. An opinion or a view can be right or wrong, but not a ritual act because ritual action is not an opinion or a view but a form of life.

The Frazerian method was given up in anthropology a long time ago. In fact, Frazer was an armchair anthropologist, who was doing anthropology without doing any fieldwork. According to Gellner, the problem with Frazer's methodology is that "[n]one of the material had been gathered by the author himself, and he was not expected to do so. His response to the question whether he had ever met a savage is often quoted: 'Heaven forbid!'" (Gellner 1999 p.119). Wittgenstein finds Frazer spiritually so narrow, since he is not willing to really try to understand a way of life different from the English one of his time.

For Wittgenstein, to write an anthropology book one must consider the whole context of human life. "When one examines the life and behaviour of mankind throughout the world, one sees that, except for what might be called animal activities, such as ingestion, etc., etc., etc., men also perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions" (Wittgenstein 1993 p. 129). Our forms of life and practices rest on nothing external, therefore a book on anthropology is written only if we observe practices from within. To say that, as Frazer does, there is the search for truth, in the search for truth error can occur, and this error can be understood by successive testing, presupposes our observing forms of life from an "external point of view" (Crary and Read 2000 p.2). For Frazer, science as a world-view is justified over other world-views such as magic and religion. This, in turn, is asserted only if we accept that second-order criteria guarantee the objectivity of science i.e., our language-games rest on something external.

The alternative Wittgenstein offers for doing social sciences is *perspicuous representation*. It is not simply another methodology because he doesn't believe that there should be a method in social science. Perspicuous representation brings an understanding, which consists in *seeing the connections*, and thereby similarity and the relatedness of the facts (Wittgenstein 1993 p.133). The Wittgensteinian perspicuous representation is therapeutic. The method he suggests for social sciences is the same method he suggests for philosophy. In both of these disciplines he warns us not to advance explanatory, metaphysical theories. In both of these cases, he tries to get us to see the confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing and theorizing. He wants us "to look and see" rather than think, and with this he means, *à la Kant*, that thinking has illusive power, we fall into transcendental illusion in the process of

philosophizing. The source of our philosophical confusions is our craving for generality, our desire to survey language from an external point of view. The attempt to find a common structure representing the development of human thought is to view forms of life from an external point of view. In Wittgenstein's understanding, on the other hand, the essence of thought and language (if there is such an essence) cannot be understood by means of metaphysical, explanatory theories, but by attention to our everyday forms of expression and to the world those forms of expression serve to reveal. Wittgenstein radically tries to free us from the idea of an external standpoint and this is because of a therapeutic aspiration.

III

According to Wittgenstein, Spengler's view constitutes an example to perspicuous representation¹. Why does Wittgenstein prefer Spengler? What does Spengler say regarding the development of human thought? For Spengler, there are two periods: culture and civilization. Culture is an early stage in the history of a community. This stage is characterized by great creations of art and science. Civilization, on the other hand, is the period where artistic and scientific achievements and great creations of culture begin to decline. On this view, cultures are organic structures. History is not something linear because there are, there have been, there will be a multitude of facts, and a number of many cultures, each of which has its own ideas, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, and its own death. Spengler emphasizes the multiplicity of arts, mathematics, and physics: "each in its deepest essence different from others, each limited in duration and self-contained, just as each species of plant has its peculiar blossom or fruit, its special type of growth and decline" (Spengler 1926 p.21).

Spengler's view assumes that each culture is limited by its own idea and life. This reminds us of Kuhn's concept of "incommensurability." Spengler's account presupposes strong incommensurability among cultures. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, does not defend incommensurability in the strong sense of the word. Kuhn's *strong incommensurability thesis* (as I call it) implies two important claims; nontranslatability and incomparability. As a philosopher of science, Kuhn was very much influenced by Wittgenstein: Kuhn's view that competing paradigms are not translatable into one another's language stems from the idea that the proponents of competing paradigms live in a different language-community (Kuhn 1970 p.202). That is to say, successive paradigms cannot be logically compared. Although Kuhn in his later writings, particularly *The Essential Tension* and in the Postscript, maintains that partial communication and partial translation across paradigms are possible, his arguments are not very convincing.

The strong incommensurability thesis defended by Kuhn depends on his concept of knowledge. Kuhn defines knowledge in the Postscript to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. For Kuhn, there are three characteristics of knowledge: "What is built into the neural process that transforms stimuli to sensations has the following characteristics: it has been transmitted through education; it has, by trial, been found more effective than its historical competitors in a group's current environment; and finally, it is subject to change both through further education and through the discovery of misfits with the environment" (Kuhn 1970 p.196). When individuals belong to the same group and thus share education, language, experience and culture, their sensations are the same (Kuhn 1970 p.193). Kuhn's idea that observation is theory-laden leads to this view. Kuhn's thesis boils down to this: there is a gap between stimuli and sensations and it is bridged by education, experience, culture, language and theory. That is to say, the same stimulus may produce very different sensations depending on an individual's upbringing. Thinking within this framework, of course, paves the way for nontranslatability, and incomparability because all of our sensations are heavily influenced by our education, culture, and language. Hence, it is not possible to understand people of another culture speaking another language because their talk is so deeply affected by their education.

Wittgenstein's view implies a weakened version of incommensurability because in his understanding there is no gap between stimuli and sensations as asserted by Kuhn. Our awareness of stimuli is immediate awareness. The gap between stimuli and sensations can be filled neither by beliefs, nor by theory, nor by culture, nor by language. My failure to perceive ultraviolet and infra-red rays is not the result of my training. My perception that objects around me do not appear and disappear at intervals, or I have two hands is not an acquired belief. They are not transmitted by my community of language-users. It is evident that although we may share language, community and education with color-blind and tone-deaf people, we do not have the same sensations they do because their biological apparatus is different. We cry when we feel pain, and we smile when we are happy. Such primitive reactions are shared by all human beings. We even share some primitive reactions with animals. When discussing Frazer's account Wittgenstein says that there are similarities as well as dissimilarities among all rites. There is a "multiplicity of faces with common features" (Wittgenstein 1993 p.143). This sharing our sense of what is funny and what is sad, sharing gestures, produces the commonality among multiplicity.

This view, on the other hand, is not committed to some kind of naturalist foundationalism because it need not use *natural reactions* to justify one form of life over another. For one thing, these primitive responses are shaped and reshaped in practices. In other words, there is a reciprocal relation between culture and nature. The cultural is

usually erected upon the natural, but there is no sharp distinction between these realms, and there is continuity between them. The difference between Kuhn's view and the weakened form of incommensurability is that in the weakened version sensation is affected not only by culture, language and theory, but also by the effects of our natural reactions on culture and theory. The cultural here is associated with the contractual character of convention, and hence with the social aspect of human life and communities. By contrast, the natural is related to biological differences between species, between the human and lower or higher forms of life. The differences between different forms of life are not a matter of kind, but a matter of degree. Consequently, it becomes more and more difficult for human beings to understand lower forms of life, but easier to understand higher forms of life.

Apart from the idea of strong incommensurability Wittgenstein approves of Spengler's view that cultures are organic structures, they are born, grow, decline and fall. Perspicuous representation is to realize that the development of human thought cannot be understood in a vacuum, but by seeing the connections between facts. Seeing connections is to evaluate the world as the whole. Frazer's analysis, on the other hand, is devoid of such contextual evaluations.

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Endnote

- 1 "The concept of perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It denotes the form of our representation, the way we see things. (A kind of 'World-view' as it is apparently typical of our time. Spengler)" (Wittgenstein 1993 p.133).