

THE MYTHOLOGY IN OUR LANGUAGE

Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough

Translated by Stephan Palmié

Edited by Giovanni da Col and Stephan Palmié

With critical reflections by Veena Das,
Wendy James, Heonik Kwon, Michael Lambek,
Sandra Laugier, Knut Christian Myhre,
Rodney Needham, Michael Puett,
Carlo Severi, and Michael Taussig



HAU Books
Chicago

© 2018 HAU Books and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stephan Palmié, Giovanni da Col, Veena Das, Wendy James, Heonik Kwon, Michael Lambek, Sandra Laugier, Knut Christian Myhre, Rodney Needham, Michael Puett, Carlo Severi, and Michael Taussig

Cover: “A wicker man, filled with human sacrifices (071937)” © The British Library Board. C.83.k.2, opposite 105.

Cover and layout design: Sheehan Moore

Editorial office: Michelle Beckett, Justin Dyer, Sheehan Moore, Faun Rice, and Ian Tuttle

Typesetting: Prepress Plus (www.prepressplus.in)

ISBN: 978-0-9905050-6-8

LCCN: 2018962822

HAU Books
Chicago Distribution Center
11030 S. Langley
Chicago, IL 60628
www.haubooks.com

HAU Books is printed, marketed, and distributed by The University of Chicago Press.
www.press.uchicago.edu

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

CHAPTER 7

Wittgenstein on Frazer

MICHAEL PUETT

PART I: INTRODUCTION

In his critique of James Frazer, Ludwig Wittgenstein consistently takes rituals that Frazer presented as based upon mistaken, prescientific understandings of the world and instead demonstrates that if the ritual actions are on the contrary understood *as* rituals, they can be understood in entirely different ways. But the ways in which Wittgenstein then discusses ritual are often quite counterintuitive and worth discussing in depth.

Let's begin by looking at Wittgenstein's critiques:

How misleading Frazer's explanations are becomes clear, I think, from the fact that one could very well invent primitive practices oneself, and it would only be by chance if they were not actually found somewhere. That is, the principle according to which these practices are ordered is a much more general one than [it appears] in Frazer's explanation, and it exists in our own soul, so that we could think up all the possibilities ourselves. (#13)

The basis of ritual practice is to be found in the souls of all humans. The practices that emerge from humans are thus readily understandable and even predictable when understood as such:

We can thus readily imagine that, for instance, the king of a tribe becomes visible for no one, but also that every member of the tribe is obliged to see him. The latter will then certainly not occur in a manner more or less left to chance; instead, he will be *shown* to the people. Perhaps no one will be allowed to touch him, or perhaps they will be *compelled* to touch him. Think how after Schubert's death his brother cut Schubert's scores into small pieces and gave to his favorite pupils these pieces of a few bars. As a gesture of piety, this action is *just* as comprehensible as that of preserving the scores untouched and accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, this could still be understood as a gesture of piety. The ceremonial (hot or cold) as opposed to the haphazard (lukewarm) is what characterizes piety. (#13)

The content of the ritual is not what matters. The goal is to understand the sensibilities and dispositions that rituals express—sensibilities and dispositions embedded in the soul of any human. The comparative principle is then to find (or even imagine) possible ways that such dispositions have been or could be expressed.

The way such expression occurs is of less relevance than the fact of the expression. People being prevented from seeing a king, or being compelled to do so, are expressions of the same sense of extraordinary power; cutting up Schubert's scores and handing them out to disciples, or preserving them and making them inaccessible, are expressions of the same sense of piety. Unlike the world of chance and the haphazard, ritual is a world of required activity expressing a given sensibility. It is either hot or cold as opposed to the random lukewarm.

As Wittgenstein states elsewhere,

All these *various* practices show that we are not dealing with the descent of one from the other, but with a commonality of spirit. And one could invent (confabulate) all of these ceremonies on one's own. And the spirit in which one would invent them is their common one. (#46)

One is looking for the common spirit that underlies the various practices (whether real or invented).

What interests Wittgenstein is thus a framework in which we would connect ceremonies based upon their common rootedness in such a given, human sensibility:

If one sets the phrase “majesty of death” next to the story of the priest king of Nemi, one sees that they are one and the same. The life of the priest king represents what is meant by that phrase. Whoever is gripped by the [idea of] majesty of death can express this through just such a life. —Of course, this is also not an explanation, it just puts one symbol for another. Or one ceremony in place of another. (#5)

The interest in this work comes precisely from the fact that we are exploring inclinations that we ourselves have as well: “Frazer’s explanations would not be explanations at all if they did not, in the end, appeal to an inclination in ourselves” (#13).

Wittgenstein elsewhere elaborates on the method:

There is a manifold of faces with common features that keep surfacing here and there. And what one would like to do is draw lines that connect the components in common. What would still be lacking then is a part of our contemplation, and it is the one that connects this picture with our own feelings and thoughts. This part gives such contemplation its depth. (#39)

The first step would be to connect the common features that appear among these rituals. And the next part is the contemplation, a contemplation that will connect the general picture that emerges with our own feelings and thoughts. This gives the contemplation its depth.

Such depth, it must be emphasized, can be a difficult thing to contemplate, as it opens up the darker aspects of human life. For Wittgenstein, these darker aspects are precisely one of the things we preclude ourselves from contemplating fully when we use the sort of framework employed by Frazer. Take, for example, the Beltane fire ritual. From Frazer’s perspective, the darker aspect of the ritual comes from the fact that it *may* once have included human sacrifice. But for Wittgenstein this won’t do. The depth only comes if we do *not* allow ourselves to create such a distance, relegating the darker side to what may have existed in some primitive past:

Here it appears as though it were only the hypothesis that gives the matter depth. . . . It is thus clear that what gives this practice depth is its *connection* with the burning of a human being. . . . The question is: Does this—shall we say—sinister character adhere to the custom of the Beltane fire in itself as it was practiced a

hundred years ago, or only if the hypothesis of its origin were to be confirmed? I believe that what appears to us as sinister is the inner nature of the practice as performed in recent times, and the facts of human sacrifice as we know them only indicate the direction in which we ought to look at it. (#42)

The depth comes only when we recognize the sinister character of the ritual—a character that exists not because of some hypothetical past but rather because it inheres in the inner nature of the practice as it is still performed. And what is this “inner nature”? It involves “what one might call the spirit of the festival,” including, “the kind of people that take part in it, their usual way of behaving [on other occasions]—that is, their character—and the kind of games they play at other times” (#42). And what would one discover thereby? “One would see that what is sinister lies in the character of these people themselves” (#42), including, one might add, the contemplating subject.

The depth, in short, comes from seeing that what is sinister in the ritual lies in the character of the people themselves—a character that we share as well: “When I see such a practice, or hear of it, it is like seeing a man who speaks sternly to another for trivial reasons, and noticing from the tone of his voice and his demeanor that on a given occasion this man can be scary. The impression I get from this can be a very deep and extraordinarily sinister one” (#43).

Wittgenstein’s critique of Frazer is not aimed at calling for a more nuanced study of the contexts within which the practices Frazer is discussing came to be meaningful. This would be the post-Malinowskian ethnographer’s critique. Wittgenstein’s critique is really ethical in nature. Ethical in its critique of Frazer, and ethical in its implications for how we should use anthropological data to gain a deeper understanding of humanity.

Why, from Wittgenstein’s perspective, would this be of such ethical concern? Frazer’s use of explanations does not simply lead to a misunderstanding of the rituals. It leads to a loss of the spiritual issues that really matter: “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of the observances are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves” (#19).

So let’s turn to these spiritual matters.

We have already seen that they spring from a common inclination. But then why look for them in primitive rituals? As Wittgenstein states: “I believe the characteristic feature of primitive man is that he does not act on the basis of *opinions*

(as Frazer thinks).” Contrary to the British intellectualist tradition, primitive man is, in a sense, more right because he doesn’t ascribe actions to beliefs.

But we fail to recognize this when, like Frazer, we fail to see them as rooted in common human inclinations. Hence, Wittgenstein’s consistent move is to divorce rituals, ceremonies, and magical practices from the world of belief and doctrine and instead root them in the dispositions, inclinations, and sensibilities common to all humans. And divorce them as well from the world of chance, of haphazard occurrences, and of means-end activities in which humans alter the world for their benefit—using resources, for example, to build huts (#10). By so divorcing them, one can see them for what they are—spiritual matters. Spiritual matters that are shared by all humans, but perhaps more intensely so in primitive rituals, unobstructed by false ideas about doctrine.

In other words, if we assume the only human mode of being consists of making representations of the world and undertaking means-end activities to benefit ourselves, not only do we misunderstand primitive rituals, we also fail to see such inclinations playing out in our own lives.

But where would we find them in our own lives? Intriguingly, the modern examples that Wittgenstein uses to show similarities with “primitive” rituals are not the obviously religious ones—going to a church, for example. His modern examples on the contrary are the mundane ones where our emotions explode forth—people speaking sternly to one another (#43), hitting the ground with a cane (#31), being unsettled by love (#3). There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, including, obviously enough, the hope of demonstrating how universal the sentiments are: the ritual may seem bizarre, but we do the equivalent all the time. But there may be other reasons as well. The interesting depth of humanity, for Wittgenstein, is not to be found in the organized religions of the day, as they too are based on doctrines and theories. It is rather to be found in those activities that most elicit our basic human inclinations.

What we find in “primitive” rituals, therefore, are clear expressions of the ways that human inclinations play out in human practices—expressions that can be found in recent times in mundane activities (hitting the ground with a cane, someone speaking sternly to another), but are more difficult to find in distinctively religious contexts. This is why Wittgenstein is keenly concerned to rescue these practices from a Frazerian reading that would see them as simply errors based upon a misunderstanding of the workings of the world. But it is also why Wittgenstein is not terribly concerned with the rituals themselves, the contexts in which they were meaningful, or even much about the content of the rituals

themselves. His concern is rather to line them up with other ritual actions that, while differing in form and content, nonetheless point toward similar human inclinations. Frazer's attempts to explain the happenings at Nemi entirely miss the point of what is interesting: the ritual emerges out of human dealings with the terribleness of death, and that is precisely why it is of interest to us.

This is what Wittgenstein means when he says, "A whole mythology is deposited in our language" (#24). A mythology that is present not as historical remnants from a previous period of human evolution but a mythology that is with us still, as it is in the Beltane ritual. That is with us still in all the complexities of being human, including our unsettledness and our sinister sides. But we miss it because of our emphasis on theory, explanation, means-end rationality.

Although he does not use the word, what interests Wittgenstein in the *Remarks* is sincere, authentic religious commitment: the authentic religious commitment that emerges from basic human experiences in the world, properly contemplated in depth. If Frazer operated in the realm of (bad and good) science, Wittgenstein operates in the realm of religious commitment—a commitment that is lost when we try to explain away the practices as based on mistaken representations, and a commitment that we have lost as well through our emphasis on reducing everything to theory. A commitment, then, that would be the same for any human who fully and authentically lives up to his or her experience. The thrust, in other words, is what we can learn from the practices once we see them as related to actions that we undertake ourselves. What ultimately interests Wittgenstein is the depth of contemplation that can come from seeing these inclinations laid bare, without the explanations and theories and doctrines that otherwise overlay that experience.

So what are the larger implications of this for anthropology?

I mentioned above that Wittgenstein says almost nothing about the larger contexts within which these rituals were practiced. But it is worth pausing a bit on the *almost*. With the Beltane ritual, Wittgenstein's call was to explore "the kind of people that take part in it, their usual way of behaving [on other occasions]—that is, their character—and the kind of games they play at other times" (#42). As we saw, the goal of the exercise for Wittgenstein was to demonstrate that the sinister sides of the ritual were also to be found in the daily lives of the people, and that the ritual was thus rooted in and emerged from their daily experience. And this was distinguished from other aspects of our lives, where we do use the sorts of means-end rationality that Frazer was emphasizing—working with wood to build a hut, for example. Wittgenstein gives the hut example to demonstrate that

of course “primitives” perfectly well understand how the world operates, while ritual comes out of the inclinations that develop in our daily experience.

But the distinction between ritual and nonritual activity could perhaps be elaborated a bit more. And to do so, let’s try one of the very things that Wittgenstein argues against: looking at indigenous discussions—let’s even call them theories—of ritual.

In early China, one finds analyses of ritual that might at first glance seem similar to those offered by Wittgenstein. They are all about working with the complexities of human dispositions, most certainly including the darker sides. But the difference is that the activities, roles, and behaviors played out in the ritual sphere are not seen as expressions of our inclinations, nor are they rooted in our experience of the world. They are rather presented as “as if” worlds that work precisely because they are disjunct from and in tension with our nonritual experiences (Seligman et al. 2008: 28–34; Puett 2014). These as-if worlds are usually self-consciously counterintuitive to the worlds that we otherwise inhabit. They are not so much expressions of our deepest inclinations but rather the places where we work with and against those inclinations through imaginative play.

These as-if worlds are not repositories of beliefs. But they are also not repositories of the same inclinations that would govern our behavior when, for example, someone speaks sternly. Wittgenstein’s goal in emphasizing the links between ritual activity and basic human inclinations was to force us to take ritual seriously. But, ironically, by creating too coherent a picture of this side of human behavior, by rooting ritual so tightly in the realm of basic human inclinations, Wittgenstein may lose precisely the complexity of human activity that interests him so deeply. If we follow these indigenous theories, then it is precisely the tension-filled *relationship* between ritual and nonritual activity that is of interest—the daily work of shifting between the different types of ritual and nonritual worlds that humans are constantly creating. This, perhaps, is where we really find the depths of humans.

PART II: COMMENTARIES

1. One must begin with error and transform it into truth.

That is, one must uncover the source of the error, otherwise hearing the truth won’t help us. It cannot penetrate when something else is taking its place.

To convince someone of what is true, it is not enough to state the truth; one must find the *way* from error to truth.

Again and again I must submerge myself in the water of doubt.

Frazer's representation of human magical and religious notions is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*.

Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the *Confessions*?

But—one might say—if he was not in error, then surely so was the Buddhist saint—or whoever else—whose religion expresses entirely different notions. But none of them was in error except where he was putting forth a theory.

Already the idea of explaining the practice—say the killing of the priest king—seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is to make the practice plausible to those who think like him. It is very strange to present all these practices, in the end, so to speak, as foolishness.

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

When he explains to us, for example, that the king would have to be killed in his prime because, according to the notions of the savages, his soul would otherwise not be kept fresh, then one can only say: where that practice and these notions go together, there the practice does not spring from the notion; instead they are simply both present.

It could well be, and often occurs today, that someone gives up a practice after having realized an error that this practice depended on. But then again, this case holds only when it is enough to make someone aware of his error so as to dissuade him from his mode of action. But surely, this is not the case with the religious practices of a people, and that is why we are *not* dealing with an error here.

Commentary: Frazer's analysis, according to Wittgenstein, is focused upon demonstrating that earlier magical and religious ideas were simply hypotheses about the workings of the world—hypotheses that have since been corrected as humans have gradually developed better theories of how the world operates.

Wittgenstein's opening critique is precisely on this point. Magical and religious notions are not attempts to develop an accurate theory of the world, and religious practices are not attempts to apply these theories in acting upon the world. Frazer is misunderstanding them altogether. As Wittgenstein states, "All that Frazer does is to make the practice plausible to those who think like him."

From such a beginning, it might appear that Wittgenstein's call would be for a careful study of what the actors in the cultures in question were trying to do. And, to some extent, that will be true, but not in the ways that one might immediately expect.

Hints of Wittgenstein's primary concerns are clear almost immediately. "Again and again I must submerge myself in the water of doubt." One of the things that particularly bothers Wittgenstein about Frazer's approach is that the analyst becomes someone who is, in a sense, simply correcting the errors of those undertaking religious practice. The analyst learns nothing from the religious practices themselves.

And he goes a step further as well. Wittgenstein is not simply criticizing Frazer's attempt to see religious notions as errors. He is also arguing against any attempt to explain a practice by means of religious notions. In other words, Wittgenstein's critique is not aimed at saying that Frazer has failed to consider the indigenous notions underlying a given practice. The critique is rather aimed at any attempt to explicate a religious practice in terms of notions at all.

2. Frazer says it is very hard to discover the error in magic—and this is why it persists for so long—because, for example, a conjuration intended to bring about rain will sooner or later appear as effective. But then it is strange that, after all, the people would not hit upon the fact that it will rain sooner or later anyway.

I believe that the enterprise of explanation is already wrong because we only have to correctly put together what one already *knows*, without adding anything, and the kind of satisfaction that one attempts to attain through explanation comes of itself.

And here it isn't the explanation at all that satisfies us. When Frazer begins by telling us the story of the King of the Woods at Nemi, he does so in a tone that shows that something strange and terrible is happening here. However, the question "Why is this happening?" is essentially answered by just this [mode of exposition]: because it is terrible. In other words, it is what appears to us a terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, etcetera that gave birth to this event [or process].

Commentary: If we cannot explain a practice according to a notion, then how should we understand it? Wittgenstein gives us one of our first clues here. What gave birth to this event is something terrible.

And this is precisely what “satisfies us.” We can learn from this ritual not by placing it within an evolutionary context, running from mistaken, “primitive” representations of the world to correct, modern scientific ones. And not by analyzing it according to the notions that explain the ritual. The goal is rather to locate the emotions that generated the ritual—emotions that all humans share.

This is connected to the argument that Wittgenstein notes later:

If one sets the phrase “majesty of death” next to the story of the priest king of Nemi, one sees that they are one and the same. The life of the priest king represents what is meant by that phrase. Whoever is gripped by the [idea of] majesty of death can express this through just such a life. —Of course, this is also not an explanation, it just puts one symbol for another. Or one ceremony in place of another. (#5)

The majesty of death underlies the ritual. We—and all humans—possess the same inclinations, even though we express the inclinations in different types of rituals. But by focusing on similar expressions of this same inclination, we can understand the “primitive” rite as well.

Why would this satisfy us? Wittgenstein does not elaborate, but hints can be seen in the ensuing note.

3. One can only resort to description here, and say: such is human life.
Compared to the impression that what is so described to us, explanation is too uncertain.

Every explanation is a hypothesis.

But someone who, for example, is unsettled by love will be ill-assisted by a hypothetical explanation. It won't calm him or her.

Commentary: The proper context to understand these practices is in terms of human life in general.

As opposed to explanations, Wittgenstein is calling for descriptions—descriptions of what human life is like. The analogy is telling. “Unsettled by human love.” Like the terribleness of death in the previous note.

What interests Wittgenstein are the most profound of human sentiments and the ways that these sentiments are expressed in human practices.

Explanations do not help us to get at these sentiments. And they may—as in the case of Frazer—prevent us from doing so.

But let us return to the analogy. Note that the person unsettled by love in the analogy is not just the ritual practitioner. It seems also to include the analyst. What concerns Wittgenstein so much here is that we are dealing with complex aspects of human life, yet Frazer's approach is a (failed) attempt to not be unsettled by them. Wittgenstein's call on the contrary is for descriptions that would deal with human life in all of its complexity, instead of displacing that complexity through distancing frameworks portraying rituals as a product of mistaken understandings of the world.

If these basic human emotions are what underlie religious practice, then a true description of them may give us a more profound understanding of human inclinations and the ways those inclinations are expressed.

6. A religious symbol is not grounded in an *opinion*.

Error only corresponds to opinion.

Commentary: Opinion operates on an axis of truth and error. By working exclusively on this axis, Frazer constructs an evolutionary framework running from “primitive” (mis)understandings of the world to modern science.

But religious symbols, like religious practices, operate on another axis altogether. They are not opinions about the world but rather expressions of human inclinations. Placing them on an axis of truth and error allows us to dismiss them. The goal on the contrary is to explore religion as a means of contemplating the depths of humans.

10. The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, pierces an image of him, really builds his hut out of wood, and carves his arrow skillfully and not in effigy.

The idea that one could beckon a lifeless object to come, just as one would beckon a person. Here the principle is that of personification.

Commentary: All humans—including those Frazer would call savages—are capable of working with the world in a way that demonstrates a full understanding

of the nature of the world and of basic causative principles. They build with wood to make huts, and carve wood to make arrows.

The fact that “primitives” will do this while at the same time piercing an image of an enemy they wish to kill demonstrates that ritual practice is not based upon a mistaken understanding of the workings of the world. Ritual should rather be thought of as a different sphere of human activity. The goal is then to see what human tendencies underlie the ritual action.

What underlies the ritual uses of effigy is the principle of personification. As Wittgenstein notes as well in remark #13, personification is a common human mode of being in the world. In remark #13, Wittgenstein links personification to a related human tendency to see resemblances and similarities.

As we will see, Wittgenstein’s arguments for how one could connect ritual data is based upon this same mode of being—seeing resemblances across a seemingly disparate array of human activities across cultures and throughout history.

When looking at ritual, Frazer is using a means-end rationality—the sort of rationality that any human, savage or modern alike, is capable of using. But in misapplying this to ritual, Frazer incorrectly construes “savages” as misunderstanding the world. For Wittgenstein, the key is to recognize that ritual operates through a different human mode of being in the world, and—we shall see—even to utilize that different mode of being, rather than a means-end rationality, to study humanity.

11. And magic always rests on the idea of symbolism and of language.

The representation of a wish is, eo ipso, the representation of its fulfillment.

But magic gives representation to a wish; it expresses a wish.

Baptism as washing. —An error arises only when magic is interpreted scientifically.

When the adoption of a child is carried out in a way that the mother pulls the child through her clothes, then is it not crazy to think that there is an *error*, and that she believes to have born the child.

We should distinguish between magical operations and those operations that rest on false, oversimplified notions of things and processes. For instance, if one says that the illness is moving from one part of the body into another, or if one takes measures to draw off the illness as though it were a liquid or a state of heat, then one is entertaining a false, inappropriate image.

Commentary: Here again Wittgenstein insists on a distinction between actions that require accurate understandings of causation on the one hand, and magic on the other. Magic for Wittgenstein is not based upon an erroneous understanding of the world, and it is therefore not something that can be considered a mistaken representation of the world. Magic is not a representation of anything. It rather expresses a wish. And magic is immediately comprehensible if understood as such, since all humans have ways of expressing wishes.

The adoption ritual is not based upon a mistaken idea on the part of the mother that she has actually given birth to the child. It is rather a ritualized expression of basic human inclinations.

18. Frazer: “. . . That these operations are dictated by fear of the ghost of the slain seems certain . . .” [p. 212]. But why does Frazer use the word “ghost”? He thus evidently understands this superstition only too well, since he explains it with a superstitious term familiar to him. Or rather, he could have seen from this that there is something in us, too, that speaks in support of such observances on the part of the savages. —When I, who do not believe that there exist, anywhere, human-superhuman beings whom one can call gods—when I say: “I fear the wrath of the gods,” then this shows that I can mean something with this [utterance], or can express a sentiment that is not necessarily connected with such belief.

Commentary: Frazer’s use of the term “ghost” unwittingly reveals the very similarity between ourselves and “savages” that Frazer is intending to deny. “He could have seen from this that there is something in us, too, that speaks in support of such observances on the part of the savages.” And the similarity again lies in the emotions. We are expressing the same sentiment when we say, “I fear the wrath of the gods.” The issue is the expression of the sentiment, not a statement of a belief.

But Wittgenstein’s chosen example here is telling, as is the nature of the critique. Wittgenstein’s concern is not simply that Frazer has mistakenly read a belief into a common saying. What again bothers Wittgenstein is how Frazer’s framework allows such distance between the analyst and the practice. Wittgenstein wants us to focus instead on the deep fear that wells in all of us when dealing with death or the capriciousness of life. Looking at ritual practice elsewhere should help us to contemplate this aspect of humanity sincerely.

20. A historical explanation, an explanation in the form of a hypothesis of development is only *one* kind of summary arrangement of the data—of their synopsis. It is equally possible to see the data in their relation to one another and to gather them into a general picture without doing so in the form of a hypothesis concerning temporal development.

Commentary: Note again Wittgenstein's commitment to a religious sphere that would be treated on its own terms—not explained in terms of opinions or beliefs, and also not explained in terms of historical development. Historical development, just like analyses of notions or theories or opinions, only serve to remove us from seeing the common human sensibilities that underlie ritual activity.

Here we have one of Wittgenstein's clearest articulations of what he would like to see instead. Wittgenstein is calling for an approach that would organize rituals from throughout human history according to the emotional inclinations—the dispositions, sentiments, wishes, fears, horrors—inherent in human beings. What we would get would be a general picture of the complexity of human inclinations, including the dark sides.

31. I read, among many similar examples, of a rain-king in Africa to whom the people appeal for rain *when the rainy season comes*. But surely this does not mean that they actually think he can make rain, for otherwise they would do it in the dry periods of the year when the land is “a parched and arid desert.” For if one assumes that the people once instituted the office of the rain-king out of stupidity, it certainly still is clear that they would have previously made the experience that the rains commence in March, and they could have let the rain-king perform his work during the other parts of the year. Or again: toward morning, when the sun is about to rise, people celebrate rites of daybreak, but not at night, for then they simply burn lamps.

When I am angry about something, I sometimes hit the ground or a tree with my cane. But surely, I do not believe that the ground is at fault or that the hitting would help matters. “I vent my anger.” And all rites are of this kind. One can call such practices instinctual behavior. —And a historical explanation, for instance that I or my ancestors earlier believed that hitting the ground would help is mere shadow-boxing, for these [*sic*] are superfluous assumptions that

explain *nothing*. What is important is the semblance of the practice to an act of punishment, but more than this semblance cannot be stated.

Once such a phenomenon is brought into relation with an instinct that I possess myself, it thus constitutes the desired explanation; that is, one that resolves this particular difficulty. And further investigation of the history of my instinct now proceeds along different tracks.

Commentary: An explanation in terms of either a (mistaken) representation of reality or a historical analysis fails to do justice to the ritual. Rather, one finds the human instinctual behavior that corresponds in any given society to the ritual in question.

Rites come out of the instinctual behavior of humans—instincts that all of us share. “All rites are of this kind.”

The goal is then to bring religious phenomena from “primitive” cultures into relation with instincts that we ourselves possess. This is all the explanation that is required. Further investigation would thus be properly focused on the instinct, rather than trying to further explain the ritual according to historical development or according to notions, theories, or doctrines, let alone the progressive rationalization of human life worlds.

Wittgenstein’s example here is hitting the ground with a cane when one is angry. What is important is the semblance between this action and an act of punishment—not because one believes that one is punishing the ground but rather because the acts emerge from a common instinct of anger and rage. Based upon this semblance, one brings the activities in question in relation to each other. The inquiry can thus explore the nature of this instinct in more depth.

33. P. 168. (At a certain stage of early society the king or priest is often thought to be endowed with supernatural powers or to be an incarnation of a deity, and consistently with this belief the course of nature is supposed to be more or less under his control . . .)

It is of course not the case that the people believe that the ruler has these powers while the ruler himself very well knows that he does not have them, or does not know so only if he is an idiot or fool. Rather, the notion of his power is of course arranged in a way such that it corresponds with experience—his own and that

of the people. That any kind of hypocrisy plays a role in this is only true to the extent that it suggests itself in most of what humans do anyway.

Commentary: The notion of divine rulership is not based upon a false belief regarding the supernatural powers of the ruler. The people can of course see as well as the ruler himself that he possesses no such powers. It is rather based upon the experience of power—an experience common to all humans.

Note again that for Wittgenstein, the key for a religious notion, like a religious practice, is that it “corresponds with experience.” This is the genesis of both religious notions and rituals. And, since they are rooted in human experience, this is the basis by which we can contemplate them in depth.

But such a commitment to experience as the rooting principle behind religious notions and rituals has its dangers as well. What about religious notions and practices that work precisely because they are counterintuitive to experience? And could divine kingship be one such example?

36. P. 171. “. . . a network of prohibitions and observances, of which the intention is not to contribute to his dignity . . .” This is both true and false. Of course not the dignity of the protection of the person but rather—as it were—the natural sacredness of the divinity in him.

Commentary: We can understand the rituals surrounding a ruler not by looking at belief or by looking at practical concerns but rather by focusing on sentiments. A natural sacredness inheres in figures of authority, and the prohibitions and observances that arise around him come out of such a sentiment.

37. Simple though it may sound: The difference between magic and science can be expressed in the way that there is progress in science, but not in magic. Magic possesses no direction of development internal to itself.

Commentary: Frazer places magic and science on an evolutionary line. Magic is a result of “primitive” man’s mistaken understanding of the workings of the world, whereas science is based upon a proper understanding.

In contrast, Wittgenstein argues, we should think of these as simply two different modes of being in the world. Science, from such a perspective, is a means-end rationality toward the world—the same mode of being that allows a so-called primitive to use wood to build a hut. Over time, one gets better at

working with the world, and there is thus an inherent developmental tendency in such activities. As Frazer would put it (accurately enough, for this mode of being in the world), science is based upon developing theories about the world, and there is thus a development inherent to science as those theories are revised in response to the world. In contrast, magic (and religion) are based upon human sensibilities in the world—sensibilities rooted in experience. There is thus no inherent development in magic.

The move is thus to cordon off the sphere of magic and religion and argue that it makes sense within its own domain. It should not be seen as a theory (and thus a mistaken theory) of the world. And it is an inherent part of what all humans do.

REFERENCES

- Puett, Michael. 2014. "Ritual Disjunctions: Ghosts, Philosophy, and Anthropology." In *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhri Gupta Singh, 218–33. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Seligman, Adam, Robert Weller, Michael Puett, and Bennett Simon. 2008. *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.