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Sir Edward Tylor versus Bronislaw Malinowski: is magic false science or meaningful performance?

The genealogy of anthropologists who during the last eleven decades have concerned themselves with the demarcations between magic, science and religion is long. Within the bounds of certain parameters these various theorists have held diverse views in various mixes. I have chosen today to discuss in detail two celebrated theorists who held two maximally contrasting positions while sharing some common ground. They are Sir Edward Tylor and Bronislaw Malinowski (I shall also briefly refer to Sir James Frazer as a footnote to Tylor).

The common ground that Tylor and Frazer on the one side and Malinowski on the other shared was not only the use of the categories of magic, science and religion to organize their materials, but also the appeal to the needs and mental aptitudes of the individual actor, i.e. to individual psychology and biology as providing the ultimate explanation of human thought and action. Tylor in the fashion of the philosopher Mill attempted to derive the laws of social phenomena from those of individual life; Malinowski sought explanation in terms that one commentator (Edmund Leach) has likened to the individualist pragmatism of William James.

But beyond this shared ground, not only a generational gap but also a vast difference in theoretical ambitions and personal experience separated them.

Tylor and Frazer, securely placed in the British Victorian intellectual establishment, living at the height of British imperial expansion and presence, excited and intrigued by a flood of missionary accounts and travellers' tales of exotic peoples and remote cultures, and fired by the ambition to discover the key to all mythologies and to unravel the story of human progress from the dark ages to Victorian heights, sat in their comfortable armchairs to arrange the received information according to a tree of evolution and ladder of progress.

Malinowski, a Polish *émigré* to England at the turn of the twentieth century, displaced once again by the events of the First World War to engage in first-hand field observation of life in the Melanesian fringes of Australia, was stimulated and excited as well as shocked by his intimate and long encounter

with the Melanesian natives, and dreamed in his tent, pitched on island beaches, of telling the world about Trobriand exotic life in the round, and of making the Trobriand Islands a microcosm of human life in general, and thereby winning enduring fame for himself. On December 2, 1917 on his second trip to the Trobriands from Australia, Malinowski wrote these words in his diary as his boat in the early afternoon arrived near the island of Gumasila, within sight of his destination: "Rapture over the beautiful formes, Joy: I hear the word Kiriwina. I get ready... Feeling of ownership. It is I who will describe them or create them."¹ Again, in his diary, he remarked later on about another island: "Joyful feeling of recognition. This island, though not 'discovered' by me, is for the first time experienced artistically and mastered intellectually."²

The intellectualist, rationalist and evolutionary theories of Tylor

In the history of anthropological thought, Sir Edward Tylor and Sir James Frazer, two eminent Victorians, are the most dogged of the theorists who attempted to arrange the categories of magic, science and religion in developmental schemes.

Tylor's life was a long one, spanning some eighty-five years (from 1832 to 1917), and it is said by some that his longevity was linked to the influence he wielded. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (two volumes), the text in which we are primarily interested, was published in 1871: we may note in passing that Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872, though it seems that Tylor was not so much influenced by Darwin's model of science as by Lyell's uniformitarian geology.

Tylor regarded himself as a professional anthropologist; he was a distinguished member of the Ethnological Society and of the Anthropological Society in the 1860s and as Burrow remarks: "His appointment in 1884 to the newly created Readership in Anthropology at Oxford was a proper reward for such professional zeal as well as for his writings."³ R. R. Marett who studied with him at Oxford acclaimed him as "the Father of Anthropology."⁴

Before I describe Tylor's conception of science as he tried to practice it, it is relevant to mention his non-conformist Quaker parentage and background which gave him a strong aversion to religious ritual of the kind displayed in Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism. He had no feeling for what religion, particularly public, organized, ritualized religion, meant to the worshippers themselves. A Quaker background, a non-sectarian bent, belief in the individual as the basis of social and cultural phenomena, a commitment to moral progress, and faith in the explanatory value of science: these were the components of Tylor's intellectual orientation.⁵

Tylor combined science and reform; he was a social evolutionist with a

profound commitment to the science of social development. He concluded his second volume of *Primitive Culture* with these words:

"To the promoters of what is sound and reformers of what is faulty in modern culture, ethnography has double help to give. To impress men's minds with a doctrine of development, will lead them . . . to continue the progressive work of the past ages . . .

"It is a harsher, and at times even painful, office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old cultures which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less urgently needful for the good of mankind. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science."⁶

At the same time Tylor held that the study of human life is a branch of natural science; indeed he held that there can be only a single unified science. He therefore conceived evolution in deterministic, nomothetic and naturalistic terms, i.e. as capable of description in terms of general laws of nature. His scientific method⁷ involved the sorting of phenomena into "species"-like groupings, and then arranging these social species in levels or grades. This scientific ambition borrowed from geology and biology was hard to fulfill in regard to the study of social life, as many a theorist has found out. "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense," according to Tylor's celebrated catch-all definition, "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, acquired by man as a member of society"; and he asserted that "the first step in the study of civilization is to dissect it into details and to classify these into their proper groups." These proper groups were "weapons, textile arts, myths, rites and ceremonies, in that order."⁸

Now culture, as Tylor defined it, was a unitary phenomenon characteristic of mankind as a whole. Closely related to this generic conception of culture was Tylor's affirmation of the psychic unity of mankind, evidenced by the parallelism or independent occurrence of the same inventions around the globe. (Tylor was no advocate of the theory of diffusion of discoveries from centers of civilization to the uninventive but receptive peripheries.) Yet at the same time, Tylor held that there was a mental evolution and a ladder of progress in mankind's history, which were the results of differential adaptation to circumstances. The establishment of the ladder was enabled, as he saw it, by the evidence of survivals. The doctrine of survivals had three propositions. Today's primitive customs of simpler peoples are the same as, or comparable to, those of antiquity; higher civilizations have preserved certain primitive features or customs as survivals which are paradoxically testimonies to their progress; the behavior of our (European) infants and children today illuminate the conduct of adult savages in the non-European world, that is to say, ontogeny (the history of individual development) recapitulates phylogeny (the "racial" evolution of mankind). Thus the yardstick of survivals was employed to plot an evolutionary scheme from savagery through barbarism to

civilization. Tylor's scheme of progressive development also employed the notion that since early or primitive man was closer to "nature," his technology as well as his cultural creations were also closer to the natural state. Thus stone tools are merely modifications of natural things. Similarly, primitive languages, developed by imitating sounds in nature, still show evidence of their beginnings. But as culture and technology advanced mankind was less constrained by natural limitations and associations and thus they developed in a more diversified, freer and more creative and conventional manner. In line with this, Tylor, as we shall see, adopted this same distancing logic from natural to metaphorical or conventional to postulate the development of religion from a lower natural to a higher "revealed" state.

On magic and the occult sciences

Tylor interestingly never attempted in *Primitive Culture* to directly compare and contrast magic with religion (though he compared magic with science in an indirect way). He merely separated in space magic from religion – his discussion of magic was in volume 1 and his discussion of religion was in volume 2.

Unlike his relatively neutral discussion of religion, Tylor viewed the "magical arts," witchcraft and the "occult sciences" (as he called them), whenever they were encountered in the civilized European societies, as *survivals* from a barbarous past, from which these societies were necessarily becoming estranged, and which they were destined to discard altogether. He therefore regarded the magical arts as "one of the most pernicious delusions" that ever vexed mankind. There was no truth value at all in "the whole monstrous farrago."

What was the intellectual basis for this phenomenon? Tylor asserted that magic was based on a general human intellectual propensity, namely the principle of "association of ideas." But magic was a product of an erroneous application of these principles of association, especially the relations of analogy. The error, he said in a celebrated phrase, consists in mistaking "ideal connexions for real connexions." The false or mistaken application of the "argument of analogy" consists in contingent associative relations being taken for causal relations and then being inverted in the magical act. For example the primitive notices that the cock crows with the rising sun; he then infers that if the cock is made to crow the sun will rise. Similar associations are noted between the appearance of the sun and the behaviour of the heliotrope, so that the latter is mistakenly manipulated in an effort to control the sun.

Tylor, as far as I can see, asked two critical questions about magic, which in a sense have acted as primary puzzles or conundrums which his successors, most notably Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss in our time, have felt compelled to answer.⁹ One question is: if magic and the occult practices are a false art, does then a magician, sorcerer, diviner hypocritically and falsely

exploit a credulous public? The second question is: Why does magic persist if "the evidence was indeed against it," in the sense that frequently the promised results are not obtained? We might call this, borrowing a phrase from Sir Karl Popper, the falsification riddle: if indeed magical acts are frequently decisively falsified why do they continue to be enacted?

Tylor's discussion of these issues is complex and equivocal. He concluded that magic does not have its origin in fraud though the practitioner may be "a dupe and a cheat". And magic may persist even if the empirical evidence is against it for several reasons. A large number of successful outcomes effected by natural means are either disguised or misconstrued as results of an efficacious magic. And although a large number of failures occur, the magician prevents them from counting by adopting various stratagems. The magician is extraordinarily resourceful in the use of conjuring skills, sleight of hand, rhetoric and impudence (i.e. he has the communicative skills of an impresario). He deals in ambiguous phrases, vague diagnoses and predictions, such that most outcomes can be retrospectively interpreted as fulfillments. Or again, he blames failure on the non-fulfillment of difficult conditions essential to the magical performance and to various "interferences" human and non-human (i.e. he invokes secondary rationalizations). He is incapable of appreciating negative evidence which therefore happily allows one success to outweigh half a dozen failures (i.e. it is a common feature of optimism to forget failures and to point only to the successes).

Looking forward to our own times, we may say that Tylor's list of answers partially foreshadows, and through certain shifts in focus has enabled, advances in interpretations suggested by phrases that are in vogue today such as "self-fulfilling prophecy," "psychosomatic efficacy," "psychodrama and sociodrama," "secondary rationalizations," "negotiated cures" between doctor and patient, "impression management," "placebo effect," and so on.

Be that as it may, it may have been noticed by some of you that Tylor's answers relating to the practice of magic as "pseudo-sciences" correspond in part with Thomas Kuhn's description of the manner in which "normal science" is conducted, especially how the majority of respectable scientists working under the umbrella of a paradigm are willing to tolerate anomalies and may resort to *ad hoc* explanations and additions and apologetics to save it. (We may at the same time note that Tylor's notion of positive science is a simple version of Karl Popper's idealization of it: that at the heart of the sciences is the search for decisive falsifications.)

In any case, since Tylor saw the magical and occult arts as superstitions having no basis in truth in terms of a positivistic conception of science, in the last resort he could only attribute their practice to wrongheadedness and conservatism on the part of humanity, even though he saw their analogical basis in man's natural reason.

The Tylorian paradigm inevitably ruled out seeing witchcraft beliefs, for instance, as a "projective system" or a "symbolic system" (or to use an

impressive Marxist phrase, as "alienated objectifications") dialectically related to the social order, and that the techniques of witchcraft may be functionally related to the grappling with and amelioration of tensions and conflicts in social relations.

One wonders how far Tylor could have gone with his doctrine of "survivals" if he was set the problem of explaining the European witch-craze that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries precisely in the effervescent and turbulent years of the Renaissance and Reformation, which many scholars have regarded as ushering in the dawn of modern rationality and civilization. Trevor-Roper poses the intellectual challenge in this way in his book: the puzzle of the witch-craze was the inflammation of already existing unsystematized beliefs, the "incorporation of them by educated men, into a bizarre but coherent intellectual system," and their use by men of learning in high places to direct a dreadful persecuting force and to perpetrate wholesale purges that took a toll of thousands of lives. At no time in the Dark Ages of Europe was a "witchcraze" of this malignant order manifest. "The years 1550-1600 were worse than the years 1500-1550, and the years 1600-1650 were still worse. Nor was the craze entirely separable from the intellectual and spiritual life of those years. It was forwarded by the cultivated popes of the Renaissance, by the great Protestant reformers, by the saints of the Counter-Reformation, by the scholars, lawyers and churchmen of the age of Scaliger and Lipsius, Bacon and Grotius, Berulle and Pascal."¹⁰

We see from this example that a doctrine of survivals and of misapplication of the laws of association of ideas cannot cope with these features of the phenomenon of a witchcraft craze that raged for two centuries: The systematization of witchcraft beliefs as a body of knowledge and its integral position in a total cosmology, the periodic reactivation and intensification of the craze, because of a continuity of pressure generated by the social order in which the beliefs were grounded, or because of a longitudinal recurrence of similar patterns of social, political and religious tensions in a whole continent. These interpretive frames and hypotheses were not open to Tylor on account of his evolutionary perspective, compounded of ideas of progress and of archaic survivals, and a commitment to an individualist psychology.

Tylor on religion in *Primitive Culture*

Tylor is remembered in anthropology, aside from his catchall definition of culture, for his minimum definition of religion (and animism) as "the belief in Spiritual Beings." Tylor's treatment of religion is remarkably different from Robertson Smith's sociological treatment of it in *Religion of the Semites* (1899) which appeared some 28 years after *Primitive Culture*. While Robertson Smith would see *totemism* as the earliest manifestation of religion, in which the religion of the group or clan dominates individuals, and in which rite precedes belief, Tylor's conception of religion put belief before rite, and

saw its original basis in individual psychology. It is an example of his perspective that the laws of social phenomena are derived from the laws of individual life.

It seems that in terms of subject matter, Tylor was an innovator in focusing on primitive religion when his contemporaries like Maine were interested in legal institutions and Spencer in social structures and their functions.¹¹ This change of direction in the substantive interests of evolutionary theory was to reach its apogee in Frazer's *Golden Bough*.

Evans-Pritchard has dubbed Tylor's individualist psychology intellectualist speculation of the "if I were a horse" variety. Tylor "imagined" himself into the savage's mental condition and deduced that the first animistic projections were the doctrines of the soul and spirit. Primitive man by virtue of his natural reason postulated the notion of soul on the basis of his dream life (in which his phantom was seen as engaging in action while the dreamer slept); these same souls were transformed into spirit beings existing in their own right, after human beings who possessed souls died.

From these basic premises and features of early religious life, Tylor with an impressive skill built up his scheme in evolutionary terms. Thus lower natural religion was transformed into higher revealed religion, distinguished by morality and ethics. Take the trajectory of sacrifice as an example of his theorizing: its earliest manifestation was in the idiom of "gift" (*do ut des*) reciprocity, modelled on human relations between chiefs and ordinary persons, in which the worshipper stands to benefit because he strikes a bargain; sacrifice then develops a higher form which is based on the notion of homage to a deity: the sacrificer does something to gratify the deity as his superior; finally we reach sacrifice which expresses abnegation, in that the sacrificer voluntarily parts with a part of himself, and this intentionality represents an ethical conception appropriate to high religion.¹²

Tylor systematically built up other progressions: from the belief in souls to belief in spirits after death, on which was predicated the cult of ancestor worship on the one hand and spirit cults (exorcism and oracle possession) on the other. By means of these progressions Tylor constructed his (hypothetical) developmental scheme from animism to polytheism to monotheism, the last being the highest form.

There are many valid criticisms made of Tylor's evolutionary hierarchies in the sphere of religion. For our purposes, the most damning one is that the evolutionary scheme actually never postulated the actual mechanisms and connections by which humanity passed from level to level or cultural "species" to cultural "species" (as contained, for example, in Darwin's notion of "natural selection"). The scheme then has only an illusory magnificence, without hinges to support the edifice. As George Stocking has penetratingly remarked: "Tylor's central problem as a 'uniformitarian' evolutionist was to fill in the gap between 'Brixham Cave and European Civilization' without introducing the hand of God. Yet he produced no specific processes and

mechanisms by which cultural evolution took place, so that anthropologists are ill advised to look for a dynamic in either 'technological determinism' or 'cultural Darwinism'."¹³

The magic/culture distinction in primitive culture

As I have remarked earlier, Tylor never directly compared magic with religion (though he does compare religion with science in an indirect way).

Those phenomena Tylor identified as examples of magic and religion could be arranged in two columns as follows:

"Magical arts" and "occult sciences" (pseudo-sciences)	Religion
Sorcery Witchcraft	Animism. Doctrine of the soul and doctrine of spirits with which are associated sacrifice and soul loss ceremonies.
Astrology	
Divination with bones (haruspication)	Ancestor worship, the quintessential elementary form of primitive religion.
Chiromancy (palmistry)	Possession cults, such as oracle possession (usually benevolent) and exorcism of evil spirits.
	Fetishism (the belief in spirits in material objects; image worship).
All the magical arts are based on a mistaken association of ideas: the mistaking of "ideal connexions for real connexions."	Religion over time develops from "natural" lower religion to higher "revealed" religion. The typical rites associated with higher religion are prayer and sacrifice, which over time elaborate into several forms.

The following are the implications of this grouping.

(1) We should note first of all that Tylor saw animism, the earliest form of religion, as *coexisting* with magic in primitive societies.

(2) However, this coexistence, while possibly a plausible state of affairs, causes difficulties with regard to rigorously separating them. If magical acts are seen as acts to get practical things done in a causal mode, Tylor also sees in the lower forms of religion, such as divination and sorcery, the occurrence of dealings with spirits and deities to gain favours and get practical things done. So if animism deals with manipulation of and causation in spirits how can its objectives differ from "magical arts" and "occult sciences," which also traffic with spiritual agencies and forces in the same mode? (Evans-Pritchard

remarks that Tylor, faced with this issue, recognized that magic and religion "must continually overlap since there is often a notion of animism in the *materia medica* of magical rites."¹⁴

(3) Thirdly we see clearly how Tylor is importantly an heir to Reformation thought. He separates out a higher revealed religion in the Christian mode, which is characterized by the intercessionary forms of worship such as prayer, and by ethics and morality. Tylor's revealed religion is belief in one God, who is creator and sovereign governor in relation to whom a belief in moral retribution is appropriate. Lower religion by contrast, according to Tylor, pursues personal advantage, and is even devoid of morality and ethical content, as may be expected of a religion that is directly projected on the logic of self-interested human interpersonal relations.¹⁵ (We may note here the directly antithetical position to that of Tylor's that Durkheim held, as he did on other issues: For Durkheim religion is importantly, from its very beginnings, concerned with the regulation of the moral life of the community or society, and "the real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge . . . but it is to make us act, to aid us to live.")¹⁶ As Talcott Parsons put it, Durkheim held not so much that religion is a social phenomenon but that society is a moral phenomenon.

The role of science *vis-à-vis* magic and religion

Tylor asserted, as we have seen, that the magical arts were "pseudo-sciences." He also maintained that "natural religion" is a theory of personal causes, because it construes spirits to be real beings who act upon the universe. Tylor further argued that the role of science in civilization was to change ideas from notions of personalized force to impersonal force; science therefore necessarily dissolved animism. Let there be no mistaking Tylor's position: animism as a "personalized causation theory" is opposed to "impersonal causation" concepts of science. The source of change in the educated world, he said, "is the alteration in natural science, assigning new causes for the operations of nature and the events of life. The theory of the immediate action of spirits has here, as so widely elsewhere, given place to ideas of force and law."¹⁷

Here we see a curious lacuna in Tylor's thought (also present in Frazer's flamboyant prolixity) that can perhaps be taken to be linked to his belief in the claims of positive science as the source of all truth and his reluctance at the same time to engage directly with high religion's – that is Christianity's – truth claims *vis-à-vis* science.¹⁸

Let me explain. While Tylor tells us why science dissolves animistic ideas of spiritual forces actuating on the universe, he fails to explain why higher religion with its ethical retributive monotheism should persist in the face of science, or what moral-causal space it occupies such that it does not collide

with science. He takes refuge in the indirect formula that "Barbaric philosophy retains as real what civilized language has reduced to simile."

Tylor in any case seems to be innocent of the Christian theological maneuvers by which the will of God and laws of nature were brought into correspondence in the seventeenth century. All in all the Victorian cultural evolutionists exhibit a blockage – that can be seen as a failure of nerve or as the action of cultural blinders – when it came to the question of pushing their brand of cultural evolution into the provenance of the established church of their time.

There is one contrast to be made between Tylor's implicit position and Durkheim's remarkable suggestion. While Tylor sees the elementary religious ideas of causation in a personalistic mode as antithetical to scientific ideas of force and laws, Durkheim proposes in *The Elementary Forms* that elementary religious ideas are the precursors of scientific ideas of force, causality, and connection. In other words while Durkheim proposes an "historical" continuity between early religions and later science, Tylor proposes a discontinuous shift in paradigms.¹⁹

Perhaps one of the most devastating criticisms levelled against Tylor (that is equally appropriate to Frazer) is his never posing the question why primitives would mistake ideal connections for real ones in one domain when they do not do so in their other activities. As Evans-Pritchard puts it, and in this he and Malinowski stand together: "The error here was in not recognizing that the associations are social and not psychological stereotypes, and that they occur therefore only when evoked in specific ritual situations, which are also of limited duration . . ."²⁰ This idea of the relevance of contexts of thought and action which apply to all human beings in all societies is a seminal idea that I shall exploit in this book. Moreover, as we shall see later, this observation accords with Lévy-Bruhl's position that it is not differences in innate mental processes but differences in the way collective thought impinges on the individual that better explains differences between so-called primitive and modern mentalities.

The twilight relevance of Sir James Frazer (1854–1938)

To many laymen it may seem strangely disproportionate that I should here treat Frazer as a postscript to Tylor. For Frazer in his long professional career of some fifty-four years – his productive period began around 1884 – dominated the field of classics and archaeology, and was seen by his contemporaries as exploring the unitary experience of the human race. He was seen as the great teller of the story of how humanity from its remotest and darkest beginnings gradually developed its manifold relations and its understanding of its place in nature and in the cosmos. This story was seen as having a compelling contemporary significance because it was these primitive

intimations and understandings that later culminated in the emotional power and uplifting beauty of the great religions of the world. Yet "Nothing matches the greatness of Frazer's fame so well as the completeness of its eclipse among anthropologists today."²¹ The eclipse of Frazer is as much due to his ornate style and his prolixity (he has been accused of being a "mere miser of facts" and a voraciously diligent library mole) as to the untenability of his major thesis. Mary Douglas has suggested that Frazer's decline in our time may be attributed in part to a creative misunderstanding between the "styles" of two adjunct generations, and refers in this respect to certain remarks of Wittgenstein which I shall quote shortly.²²

On the positive side, one of Frazer's contributions was the sorting of Tylor's principles of association in magical thought into two basic types, namely the principle of similarity or resemblance (homeopathic) and the principle of contagion or contiguity. (Frazer thus subdivided magical systems into two sorts: "sympathetic magic" and "contagious magic" though he was aware that they overlapped in practice.) Frazer, much in the vein of Tylor, declared that these two are general or generic laws of thought, which were misapplied in magic. Magic, he declared in a stronger tone than that adopted by Tylor, was in some ways a precursor of science, but it was its bastard sister.

Frazer pushed the similarity and contrast between magic and science to a point which Tylor in his wisdom did not. For instance, Frazer maintained that the fundamental conception of magic is "identical with modern science," namely the "uniformity of nature." The magician believes that the same causes will always provide the same results, and as long as he performs the ceremony in accordance with the rules laid down, the desired results will inevitably follow. Thus the similarity between magical and scientific conceptions of the world is close: "In both of them the succession of events is perfectly regular and certain, being determined by immutable laws, the operation of which can be foreseen and calculated precisely, the element of chance and of accident are banished from the course of nature." It is because Tylor did not insist on, indeed did not exaggerate, the magician's commitment to the uniformity of nature and to a faith in determinism, that he could open up what we today label as the problem of secondary rationalizations and conventional strategies by which anyone committed to a "belief system" strives to save it from anomalies and falsifications. Moreover, as we have seen, Tylor in a sense shielded his separation of "magic" from "animism" by not directly confronting them, and by his equivocations when he described empirical data. But Frazer's confident and strident confrontation of magic with a positivistic conception of science makes his caveats seem obvious tortuous stratagems whenever they are proffered. Thus Frazer did concede that magic often dealt with spirits, but that when it did so, it treated them exactly as "inanimistic agents," that is, it coerced and constrained them instead of propitiating and conciliating them in the manner of religion. But there is a *non sequitur* here. To coerce another person or being is not to make that entity "inanimate." Frazer

resorts to this assertion precisely because he has decided that the magician and scientist share the same presuppositions concerning "the uniformity of nature" and impersonal causation. In making this equation Frazer, as well as Tylor in a less naive way, have both introduced a distinction which was alien to medieval or Renaissance magic in Europe predicated on the mediation of angels and planetary spirits. It is the uncomplicated resort to the Protestant formula that magic is to religion as spell is to prayer, that also leads Frazer to the melodramatic and unsustainable pronouncement about the "relentless hostility" between priest and magician, and their opposed technologies, for such statements can be easily disproved empirically.²³ Frazer could easily have made his point by the moderate phrasing that as ideal types "magician" and "priest" may be described as emphasizing different techniques and procedures depending on the kind of relation they postulate between supernatural agent and man, but that empirical cases frequently show a mixing of the two modalities.

But there is some molten gold in Frazer's volcanic overflow. For example, the associational principles of similarity and contiguity as general features of the human mind have since Frazer's time found an elaborated use in other interpretive frameworks stripped of their "causal" connotations as applied to magic. Roman Jakobson has fruitfully exploited the terms "metaphorical and metonymical associations" in his linguistic and literary studies, and after him Lévi-Strauss has popularized them in the study of savage thought, particularly in the realm of mythology. In my own essay on "The Magical Power of Words" I apply them (I hope productively) in the analysis of Trobriand ritual.²⁴

Frazer also extended Tylor's more nuanced discussion in unacceptable ways. He made nonsense of Tylor's categories by arranging without qualifications magic, religion and science in an evolutionary linear scheme, with the unsupportable assertion that magic preceded religion in time, and with the inescapable inference – which he however evaded – that science must inevitably dissolve religion in our time. In Frazer's evolutionary scheme, magic is older than religion in this history of humanity – indeed at this earliest stage the functions of priest and sorcerer were often combined. The age of magic corresponds to the age of stone, and a case in point are the Australian "races," according to Frazer, the lowest in mental and social development among contemporary humanity: "all men in Australia are magicians, but not one is a priest." What then led from the Age of Magic to the Age of Religion?

It was the tardy recognition of the inherent falsehood and barrenness of magic that led the more thoughtful of mankind to cast about for a truer theory of nature. Man came to realize that he had been pulling at strings to which nothing was attached. So it dawned on him that superior beings control the universe, and he assumed a humble dependence towards them and propitiated them for favours. Frazer defined religion as the "propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course

of nature and of human life."²⁵ But if this change of tack became necessary, why did not intelligent man – who must have existed at all times – detect the fallacy of magic sooner? Why did magic persist in the face of falsification, a modern Popperian might ask? Frazer's reply given in passing was as follows: "The answer seems to be that the fallacy was far from easy to detect, the failure by no means obvious, since in many, perhaps in most cases, the desired event did actually follow, at a longer or a shorter interval, the performance of the rite which was designed to bring it about . . . Similarly, rites observed in the morning to help the sun to rise, and in spring to wake the dreaming Earth from her winter sleep, will invariably appear to be crowned with success, at least within the temperate zones."²⁶

Here indeed Frazer in his stilted fashion does illuminatingly touch on an important interpretive possibility concerning the performative context of certain kinds of ritual, particularly of the calendrical type. Durkheim remarked in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* that religion accounts for the regularity of nature rather than its extra-ordinary nature. Nadel made a similar point when he suggested that many rites are efficacious because nature is regular.²⁷ These comments make eminent sense concerning the widespread celebration of rites linked to changes of seasons, rites of rainmaking or harvesting, and other calendrical cosmic rites. In respect of these Suzanne Langer, in *Philosophy in a New Key*, made the dramatic point that these rites do not so much instrumentally "cause" rain or good harvests in a narrow sense as they complete a course of events, the results being the last accompaniments of ritual or the results following upon its performance. I may perhaps illustrate the "anticipatory" nature of these rituals that are geared to regular astronomical or calendrical changes by relating a story told me by Meyer Fortes. He once invited a rainmaker to perform the ceremony for him for an attractive fee, and the officiant in question replied "Don't be a fool, whoever makes a rain-making ceremony in the dry season?" There are, of course, many other anticipatory and expressive and performative features to such magical rites that become possible to envisage once they are extracted from the net of positivistic causality. On the whole, Frazer's simplistic evolutionary scheme and his overall characterization of magic as "bastard science" smothered other insights²⁸ which even when they occurred to him he managed to clothe them in a theatrical garb that robbed them of a general significance.

Wittgenstein's encounter with Frazer

Frazer's immense but bookish learning, and his Victorian preoccupations and fantasies indefatigably reiterated in his mannered and embroidered prose; are said to have riled some great twentieth-century thinkers, his contemporaries in time but not in thought. William James, who happened to meet the Frazers in

1900 at a *pensione* in Rome, remarked that Frazer was "a sucking babe of humility, unworldliness and sightlessness to everything but *print* . . ."²⁹

Another luminary who met Frazer only in print but has left us a much longer and more searching record of his impressions is Ludwig Wittgenstein, and since these impressions seem to touch on issues that are central to my book I have decided to reproduce them in detail.

For scholars of magic, science and religion, it is remarkably felicitous and rewarding that Ludwig Wittgenstein, arguably the greatest analytic philosopher of the twentieth century, who first championed "logical positivism" and then repudiated much of it in favour of "ordinary language philosophy," should have dipped into Frazer, the great Victorian story teller of man's remote beginnings in dark superstition and his passage to civilized thought and action. Though Wittgenstein experienced immense irritation with, and scorn for, Frazer's explanation of divine kingship and rainmaking and so on under the rubric of false "sympathetic and contagious magic," he was stimulated by the ritual and religious phenomena themselves described by Frazer to search for a different meaning of them.

Wittgenstein made some notes around 1931 upon reading the abridged one-volume edition of *The Golden Bough*, but the full translation of them into English from his papers has only recently become available, although some scholars in the past have had access to partial versions.³⁰ Wittgenstein's notes were made at the end of certain specified portions of Frazer's text, and should be read as a running commentary, which though sometimes repetitive is on the whole cumulative in effect. The notes themselves, made *ad hoc*, and never put together as a coherent and consistent critique of Frazer, nevertheless give us most valuable glimpses of Wittgenstein's spontaneous criticisms which no doubt embody his phenomenological reflections and anticipate his later conceptions such as "forms of life" and "language games." These features of Wittgenstein's later thought either foreshadow or are integral to my subsequent discussions of Malinowski, Winch and others.

I propose to reproduce those parts of his reactions that I find most pertinent, and I have divided them into five parts. Each part will begin with a reference to the contents of the passages in Frazer that prompted Wittgenstein's ripostes, followed by my own comments highlighting some themes. Then follow Wittgenstein's own remarks expressed in characteristically allusive, condensed and reflexive style. *I shall italicize certain words that seem to be particularly effective.* My comments will lengthen as we proceed in response to the cumulative implications of Wittgenstein's observations.

(1) Wittgenstein first reads Frazer's elucidation of the "laws of similarity and contact" in magical thought, and Frazer's examples of "rain kings" and the rites in which they figure. He immediately notes the significance of the timing of the rainmaking operations of the rain kings: that they occur during the season of rain and not the dry season. Wittgenstein then intimates his

dislike of the "intellectualistic" appeal to opinions/beliefs to explain ritual acts. He also – and here he goes in a different direction from the criterion of deriving meaning from contexts of use – appeals to a general human psychology which he can recognize both in himself and in the "primitive man," to describe hitting with a stick on the ground as an "instinctive" expressive act.

I believe that the characteristic of primitive man is that he does not act out of *opinions* (in opposition to Frazer).

I read in many similar examples, of a rain-king in Africa to whom people beg for rain when the rainy season comes. But that surely means that they don't really think that he could make rain, otherwise they would do this in the *dry periods* of the year when the country is "a parched and arid desert." For if one supposes that the people once instituted this office of the rain-king out of stupidity, then it is certainly clear that they had already had the experience that the rain begins in March and that at that time they ought to have the rain-king function for the rest of the year. Or also thus: towards morning when the sun wants to rise, the rites of dawn are celebrated by the people, but not in the night, rather there they simply burn lamps.

When I am angry about something, I sometimes hit with my stick on the ground or a tree, etc. But certainly I don't believe that it is the fault of the ground or that hitting can help. "I can release my anger." And all rites are of this kind. Such actions *one can call actions of instinct*. – And a historical explanation, perhaps that I formerly, or my ancestors formerly, have believed that hitting the ground might help something, these are shadow-boxing bouts, for they are superfluous assumptions which explain nothing. The similarity of that act with an act of punishment is important, but more than this similarity cannot be established.

If such a phenomenon is brought into contact with an instinct which I myself possess, then just this is the desired explanation; that is, that which resolves this special puzzlement (this special difficulty). And an observation on (further inquiry into) the history of my instincts now moves on other tracks.

(2) Frazer's examples of the worship of the oaktree (or oak god) by "all the branches of the Aryan stock in Europe" evoke Wittgenstein's brilliant and amusing aphorism about the flea and the dog, which suggest that the logic of selection of symbols in a rite consists in their "association" in an environment on the basis of symbiosis as well as difference (figure and ground). However, his suggestion that this establishing of similarities and differences (contrastive relations) between entities in the environment is also the awakening of ritual action is, as it stands, an incomplete suggestion, lacking a developed theory of "value" differentiation and "marking" in the form developed by Saussure and other linguists, and subsequently exploited by Lévi-Strauss.

There could have been no trifling reason, that is, there could have been no *reason* whatsoever why certain human tribes worshipped the oak tree; instead it is simply that they and the oak were united in an environment (symbiosis), not out of choice, rather they united in their development like the flea and the dog. If fleas were to develop a rite, then it would refer to the dog.

One could say, not their union (of oak and man) but, in a certain sense, their separation, has given *occasion* to these rites. Therefore, the awakening of the

intellect *proceeds* with a separation from the original *ground*, from the original basis of life. (The origin of *choice*.)

(The form of the awakening spirit is worship.)

(3) Frazer's fanciful account of the priest king of Nemi, a grim figure prowling in the sacred grove, carrying a drawn sword, and waiting for his stalking assassin; and Frazer's search for the *origins* of this barbarous custom in the motives of the human mind of antiquity; and Frazer's discussion of the "fallacy of magic" – as a "mistaken application of the very simplest and elementary process of the mind, namely the association of ideas by virtue of resemblance or contiguity" – these evoke a long response by Wittgenstein.

This response combines a powerful skepticism of the Frazerian attempt to apply criteria of truth and error to magical (and religious) views with a sensitive reaching into the human condition which evokes religious mysteries and seeks emotional solace. Neither metaphysical nor ultimate value commitments, or for that matter a broken heart, are amenable to, or assuaged by, positivist reality testing. Wittgenstein suggests that sometimes a *description* without adding anything is more meaningful than a forced search for an "explanation," which concept belongs to a framework of "hypotheses" deriving from "theory," and their testing for error or truth as "opinions." He also rejects a forced evolutionary search for origins of magical/religious views and practices, preferring if necessary to suggest a basis in a universal or general and timeless human propensity. Finally, he rejects the attempt to *derive* rites from beliefs.

Again and again I must dive into the water of doubt.

Frazer's presentation of the magical and religious views of mankind is *unsatisfactory*: it makes these views appear as *errors*.

Thus, was Augustine in error when he invoked God's name on every page of the Confessions?

However – one can say – if he was not in error, then indeed it was the Buddha – or whoever – whose religion expresses entirely different views. But neither of them was in error, except where he stated a theory.

Even the idea of wanting to explain the custom – such as the killing of the Priest King – seems to me to be mistaken. All that Frazer does is to make plausible people who think as he does. It is very remarkable that all these customs finally, so to speak, are represented as stupidities.

It will, however, never be that people do all these things out of pure stupidity.

If, for example, he explains that the King must be killed in his prime, because according to the views of the savages, his soul would not be preserved, then indeed one can only say: where that custom and these views go together, there the custom does not originate from the view, they are just both there.

It is possible, and it often occurs, that a man gives up a custom after he has recognized an error upon which that custom depended. However, this is the case only when it suffices to make a person aware of his error in order to change his behavior. But that is not the case with the religious customs of a people, and therefore it is not a question of error.

Frazer says, it is very difficult to discover the error in magic – and therefore it

survives so long – because for example, a conjuration which is supposed to bring about rain sooner or later seems to be effective. But in this example it is peculiar that the people don't see earlier that it does rain sooner or later anyhow.

I believe that the undertaking of an explanation, therefore, already misses the point, because one must only put together correctly what one knows, without adding anything, and the satisfaction which is sought through the explanation results from itself.

And the explanation here is not what satisfies. When Frazer begins and tells us the story of the Forest King of Nemi, he does this in a tone that shows that he feels, and he wants to let us feel, that something strange and terrible is happening here. But the question "Why does this happen?" is really answered: because it is terrible. That is, whatever we find in this event to be terrible, grandiose, ghastly, tragic, etc., anything but trivial and meaningless, that has brought this event to life.

Here one can only describe and say: human life is this way.

The explanation is, in comparison with the impression which the above writings give us, too insecure.

• Every explanation is indeed a hypothesis.

But for whomever might be disturbed by love, a hypothetical explanation will be of little help – it will not calm him.

If one compares the former story of the Priest King of Nemi with the phrase "the majesty of death", then one sees that they are both one.

The life of the Priest King represents that which is meant by that phrase.

Whoever is deeply struck with the majesty of death can express this thought through such a life. – This is also, of course, no explanation; rather it substitutes one symbol for another. Or: one ceremony for another.

A religious symbol is not based upon opinion. And error is relevant to opinion only.

One would like to say: this and that event has taken place; laugh if you can, friend.

Religious actions, or the religious life of the Priest King, is of no other sort than any genuinely religious action *today*, perhaps a confession of sins. This can also be "explained" and cannot be explained.

(4) A reading of the North American Indian rites which involve pricking effigies or shooting them with arrows in the alleged belief that the real human foe would suffer, stimulates these comments by Wittgenstein which try to replace Frazer's representation of "homeopathic magic" as false causal action with expressive action, where the representation itself is the fulfillment. This is an anticipation of John Austin's (a follower of the master) notion of "performative" acts. Wittgenstein's reaching towards the role of language in ritual acts would be more amply realized by Austin, Burke, Searle and others. Wittgenstein uses the same anticipatory (expressive-performative) ideas to interpret benevolent "imitative" rites that are enacted to facilitate childbirth or procure offspring for barren women. In reminding us that the same savage who stabs an effigy also "really" builds his hut and shapes his weapons, Wittgenstein voices the caution that Malinowski, who developed his ideas on magical language independently of Wittgenstein, also makes much of (see next chapter): that the primitive who indulges in "magic" gives evidence of practical reasoning in his technology and mastery of agriculture and crafts.³¹

To burn in effigy. To kiss the picture of the beloved. This is naturally not based upon a belief in a certain effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at a satisfaction and also obtains it. Or rather it aims at nothing at all; we act in such a way and then feel satisfied.

One could also kiss the name of the beloved, and here the substitution would be clear because of the name.

The same savage, who stabs the image of his enemy, apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and cuts his arrows skillfully and not in effigy.

And magic always depends on the idea of symbolism and of language.

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

Magic, however, brings a wish to life; it manifests a wish.

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

When the adoption of a child takes place in such a way that the mother pulls it through her clothes, then it is crazy to believe that there is some error here and that she believes she has given birth to the child.

(5) Further reading of Frazer, especially his description of savages regarding their names as vital parts of themselves as an instance of their attributing "a real and substantial bond" between a name and the person, or their regarding their acts of drinking and eating as attended with special danger, and then his use of these examples as evidence of savages' "mistaken application of the two fundamental laws of thought," finally drives Wittgenstein to an explosive denunciation of Frazer.

But we should shake off this shock and pay close attention to Wittgenstein's appeal to *general* human reason and imagination, which he, you, and I can employ to devise by thought experiment the range of primitive customs. This is possible because the principle according to which these customs are ordered is "much more general" than the one by which Frazer explains them, and they being "present in our souls" we would be able "to think out all the possibilities ourselves."

This appeal to general human imagination and reason, Wittgenstein artfully combines with another feature of symbolization familiar to Saussure and the later structuralists, that metaphorical and metonymical associations are "arbitrary" or "conventional" as well as "meaningful" and "rational": a king's sacred state is conveyed as much by his confinement from view as by his public display. Thus seemingly "opposite" enactments could signify or exemplify a single state of mind. Indeed, in human constructions anything in our "environment" could be selected and made to represent something else; also diverse entities can be made to represent the same thing and the same thing can signify polyvalent meanings. Moreover, language and other sign systems could be combined to produce complex messages in the service of human constructions of meaning.

These comments by him also raise the issue whether by appealing to a general human reason, Wittgenstein falls prey to the same intellectual fallacy Tylor and Frazer committed: to hypothetically thinking themselves into the state of mind of the "primitive." I think Wittgenstein's mental exercise is different; whereas Tylor and Frazer, fully conscious of being "civilized,"

attempted to "regress" to the primitive's condition, Wittgenstein is claiming that "civilized" man has within him the same symbolizing and ritualizing tendencies as the "primitive." This is synchronic and not an evolutionary posture.

How narrow is the spiritual life for Frazer! Thus, How impossible to understand another life in terms of the English life of his time! Frazer can imagine no priest who is not basically an English parson of our time, with all his stupidity and dullness.

Why should it not be possible for a person to consider his name to be holy? It is on the one hand the important instrument that is given to him, and on the other, like a piece of jewelry that is hung on him at birth.

One sees how misleading the explanations of Frazer are when one sees – I believe – that one could very well devise primitive customs oneself, and it would have to be an accident if they were not really to be found anywhere. *That is, the principle according to which these customs are ordered, is a much more general one than the one Frazer explains, and present in our own souls, so that we would be able to think out all the possibilities ourselves.* That, by chance, the king of a tribe is guarded from anyone's view, we can very well imagine, but also, that every man of the tribe should see him. The latter will certainly not be allowed to happen in some more or less accidental way, but he will be shown to people. Possibly no one will be permitted to touch him, though perhaps they will be required to do so. Remember that after Schubert's death his brother cut Schubert's musical scores into small pieces and gave little pieces of some of those measures to his favorite pupils. This action, as an indication of piety, is just as understandable to us as the other. And had Schubert's brother burned the musical scores, even that would be understandable as an indication of piety.

Yes, Frazer's explanations would not be explanations at all, if they did not appeal ultimately to a certain tendency in ourselves.

That the shadow of a man, which has the appearance of a human being or his mirror image, that rain, that a thunderstorm, the phases of the moon, the changing of the seasons, the similarities and differences between animals and people, the phenomena of death, of birth and of sexual life, in short, everything that a person perceives around him year after year, connected with one another in the most diverse ways, that these will appear (play a role) in his thinking (his philosophy) and his customs is obvious, or is precisely that which we actually know and which is interesting.

How could fire, or the similarity of fire with the sun, have failed to make an impression on the awakening human soul [?] But perhaps not "because he cannot explain it to himself" (the stupid superstition of our time) – for he does it become less impressive through an "explanation"?

I don't mean that specifically fire must make an impression on Everyone. Fire no more than any other phenomenon, and the phenomenon to One, the other to Another. For no phenomenon is, in itself, especially mysterious, but every one can become so to us, and just this is characteristic of the awakening spirit in man, that for him a phenomenon becomes meaningful. *One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal.* That is perhaps partly false, partly nonsense, but there is also something correct about it.

That is, one could begin a book about anthropology like this: When one observes the life and behavior of men on the earth, then one sees that men, with the exception of the actions which one could call animal-like, the absorption of food, etc., etc.,

etc., also carry out actions which have completely different (unique) character and which one could call ritual actions.

Now, however, it is nonsense to proceed so that one would say, as characteristic of these actions, that they are actions which originated from mistaken views about the physics of things. (Frazer does this when he says, magic is essentially false physics, or else false medicine/art of healing/technology, etc.)

On the contrary, that which is characteristic of ritual action is surely not a view, or opinion, whether it is now correct or false, although an opinion – a belief – itself also can be ritualistic, can belong to the rite.

If one holds it to be self-evident that man is gratified by his fantasy, then one must consider that this fantasy is not like a painted picture, or a plastic model but a complicated construction of heterogeneous components: words and images. Then one would not place operations with written and spoken signs in opposition to operations with "mental images" of events.

We must plow through the complete language.

(6) Upon reading instances of taboos laid upon warriors returning to their villages after slaying enemies – sometimes even bringing their heads – and Frazer's tedious insistence that these taboos are grounded in "superstitious fears" "dictated by fear of the ghosts of the slain," Wittgenstein's patience once again gives way.

In the following comments Wittgenstein raises the acute question of "translation between cultures": if Frazer uses the English words "ghosts" and "gods" to represent savage concepts, does this not imply that he is equating these terms with those familiar to him in his own cultural experience as a modern European? If this correspondence is made, then Frazer should have realized that there is something in him that "speaks for those modes of action of the savages." (The major issue of "translation of cultures" and "commensurability" between them will engage us at the end of my book.)

Secondly, Wittgenstein makes more explicit the difference between Frazer's arranging of data to seek and support an "evolutionary" explanation in terms of "historical" development, and his own preference for a "cognitive schema" that is synchronic, and sees the significance of "interconnecting links" in a configurational context. Wittgenstein's interpretive methodology is familiar to us in the schemas proposed by "structuralists" (and "structural-functionalists"),³² including the notion of transformation in a "formal" sense. He leaves us with the intriguing thought that the evolutionary hypothesis is also "a disguising of a formal relationship" (I take it he means that the evolutionary schema also implies a change from one imputed or constructed system or stage to another constructed system or stage).

Frazer: "... that these observances are dictated by fear of the ghost of the slain seems certain . . ." *But why does Frazer use the word "ghost"? Therefore, he very probably understands this superstition, since he explains it to us with a superstitious word which is easy to him.* Or better, he would have been able to see from it that something in us speaks for those modes of action of the savages. – If I believed (which I don't) that there are human-superhuman beings somewhere that one can

call Gods – if I say: “I fear the revenge of the Gods,” then this shows that I (*can*) mean something by it, or can give expression to a sentiment which has nothing to do with that belief (. . . which is not necessarily bound up with that belief).

Frazer would have been in a position to believe that a savage died out of error. In public school text-books, we read that Attila has undertaken all his great military campaigns because he believed that he possessed the sword of the thunder-god.

Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for they would not be so far removed from the understanding of a spiritual matter as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of primitive customs are more barbarous than the meaning of these customs.

The historical explanation, the explanation as a hypothesis of development, is only one kind of summary of the data – their synopsis. It is equally possible to see the data in their relations to each other and to combine them together into a general schema without doing it in the form of a hypothesis about temporal development.

Identification of one's own Gods with the Gods of another people. Thereby one convinces oneself that the names have the same meaning.

“And so expounds the chorus upon a secret law” one might say to the Frazerian collection of facts. This law, this idea, I can now express (represent) by a developmental hypothesis or even, analogously to the diagram of a plant, by the pattern of a religious ceremony, or even by the grouping of the factual materials alone, in a clearly arranged cognitive schema.

The concept of a clearly arranged cognitive schema is of fundamental importance for us. It signifies our form of representation, the way in which we interpret things. (A kind of “Weltanschauung”, as it apparently is typical for our time. Spengler.)

This clearly arranged cognitive schema brings about understanding, which exists just in that we “see the connections.” *Thus the importance of the discovery of interconnecting links.*

A hypothetical connecting link, however, should do nothing in this case other than to call attention to the similarity, the connection, of the facts. Like when one would want to illustrate (would illustrate) the internal relationship of the form of a circle to the ellipse by this means, that one gradually transforms an ellipse into a circle; but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse had actually, historically, originated from a circle (evolution hypothesis), but in order to *sharpen our eye for a formal relationship.*

But I can also see the evolutionary hypothesis as nothing more than the (a) disguising of a formal relationship.

(7) Wittgenstein's reading about contemporary peasant beliefs and customs in Germany concerning the competition between the reapers and the binders not to be the last to finish because “the wolf sits in the last sheaf,” followed by his reading of the Badigas of the Nilgiri Hills of South India laying the sins of their deceased upon a buffalo calf (an act reminiscent of the Jewish scapegoat), stimulates him to contemplate the whole mythology embodied in “our language” and how such knowledge should help in interpreting “their customs and speech forms.” (Wittgenstein acknowledged that he took the phrase “The mythology in the forms of our language” from the Austrian writer Paul Ernst, who used it in his preface to an edition of Grimm's *Märchen*.)

Reviewing the points he had made so far, we can say that Wittgenstein has

advanced two strategies for interpreting religious/magical views and ritual acts (including ritual speech acts):

(1) Try and identify tendencies, inclinations, motivations in general (universal) human reason and imagination, and in general human existential circumstances, that make man a “ceremonial animal” and give rise to “ritual actions.”

(2) Reflect on our own (Western) *cultural heritage*, and the mythological and ritual conceptions embodied in *our own language*, and the fusion in it of “written and spoken signs” and “mental images,” and you will see implicit affinities in all ritual actions, whether enacted by the primitive or the modern. Here I think Wittgenstein draws our attention to similarities in the collective cultural representations of humans as social and historical beings.

In the old rites we have the use of an extremely developed language of gestures.

And whenever I read Frazer, I would like to say at each point: *all these processes, these changes of meaning, we still have before us in our language of words.* Given that what is concealed in the last bundle of grain, yet also this bundle itself, and also the man who binds it, is called the “Corn Wolf,” we recognize in this a language process which is well known to us.

I would like to say: Nothing shows our relationship with the former savages better than that Frazer has at hand a word that is familiar to him and to us, such as “ghost” or “shade,” to describe the views of these people.

(This is of course different than if he were to write, for instance, how the savages imagined (imagine) that their head falls off when they have killed an enemy. Here there would be nothing superstitious or magical about our description.)

Yes, this peculiarity is related not only to the expressions “ghost” and “shade” and we have made much too little fuss over the fact that we count the word “soul,” “spirit” as part of our own educated vocabulary. *In comparison to that, it is a trifle that we don't believe that our soul eats and drinks.*

In our language a whole mythology is laid down.

Final comment

There is a latent tension in Wittgenstein's remarks. Irritated, even angered by Frazer's relentless and condescending attribution of both superstitious fears and reasoning errors to the primitive, Wittgenstein takes the opposite course of trying to demonstrate how we “civilized,” both in human endowment and in our linguistic and cultural constructions, are like those “savages.”

In proposing this unity of mankind, Wittgenstein reveals a truth that some of our contemporary philosophers have been trying to articulate: that translation of another culture's conceptions into our linguistic categories necessarily implies a “shared space,” a “bridgehead of understanding” between the two.

But Wittgenstein is famous for his notions of “forms of life” and “language games”, which if pushed in a certain direction also argue for the particularity and contextual nature of historically formed culture complexes and linguistic

genres, with their special emphases and centres of gravity. The particularity of forms of life and language games warns against the committing of "category mistakes" by equating and comparing that which is not comparable, and against the too facile assimilation of the conceptions of other peoples' conceptions to our own contemporary Western ones.

Wittgenstein's statements in another text, *On Certainty*, which belongs to the last year and a half of his life (c. 1949–51) but contains unmistakable allusions to his reflections on Frazer's *Golden Bough* made almost twenty years previously, might help us to see what he means when he associates explanation with hypotheses and theory, and why he accuses Frazer of misplaced reasoning. A mistake is something which can be tested and shown to be wrong. But the idea of testing already implies some particular system which has as its foundation a set of presuppositions and propositions which cannot themselves be tested or doubted. These propositions make the activity of questioning possible by determining what will count as evidence for arguments and verification. Therefore in order to speak of a mistake, the observer must share the actor's epistemological starting point. Says Wittgenstein: "Whether a proposition can turn out false after all depends on what I make count as determinants for that proposition." "The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference." "All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place within a system . . . The system is not so much the point of departure as the element in which arguments have their life." "In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind." "When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions." "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment."³³ Can we say that Frazer in Wittgenstein's eyes was violating the canons of commensurability, and was making a category mistake?

The tension between the two modalities of universality and particularity contained in anthropology's aspirations to translate as well as compare cultural and social forms is the subject of the concluding chapters of this book. Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer appear to revolve around these two modalities whose implications are still being explored and articulated in the 1980s.