Wittgenstein and Method in the Study of Religion

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In the "Remarks of Frazer's *Golden Bough*", Wittgenstein shows his concern for clarity amidst the temptations surrounding the seeking of explanations, especially with respect to understanding cultural practices different from one's own. Like many intellectuals in the English-speaking world in the early-to-mid twentieth century, Wittgenstein was fascinated by J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. In this text, first published in 1890, expanded to 12 volumes in 1911-15, and abridged to a single volume for more popular reading in 1922, Frazer presents a comparative, evolutionary model of the development of magic and religion in "primitive" cultures. Through his analysis of the ancient rituals of the killing of the priest king at Nemi, Frazer devises a theory of the development of human civilizations, from the primitive, to the religious, and culminating in the modern. During the 1930s and 40s, Wittgenstein read from the first volume of the *Golden Bough* with his student and friend Maurice O'Drury; along the way Wittgenstein wrote some comments on Frazer's work that eventually came to be known as the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*". These remarks were first published in 1967 and since then have come to have a place of considerable importance in studies of Wittgenstein's views on religion and the interpretation of cultures.

For better or worse, philosophers and other scholars of religions have been tempted to read Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" as offering a method to replace Frazer's apparently problematic comparative-evolutionary framework for the interpretation of ritual practices. While the expectation of finding a theory in Wittgenstein's text is understandable, it is liable to mislead. The desire to build theories is often what Wittgenstein wishes to quell in his writings. Since method remains a much-disputed topic in religious studies, debates over the usefulness of Wittgenstein persist. Far from providing a theory of religions, Wittgenstein's therapeutic practice of philosophy is occasional, driven by exposure to a particular interlocutor or author.

D. Z. Phillips, Brian Clack and Frank Cioffi have put forward three recent interpretations of Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough."[1] Phillips' interpretation is presented in connection with his own philosophy of religion, while Clack wishes to call into question some of the ways Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion have been tempted to read Wittgenstein's "Remarks." Phillips calls his own Wittgensteinian approach to the study of religions "the hermeneutics of contemplation." According to this view, to understand a practice or a belief is to understand the grammar (or the conditions of use) of that practice or belief. Clack's approach might be called a humanistic and embodied reading of Wittgenstein on religion as it argues that the central theme of the "Remarks on Frazer" is the everyday presence of ritual practice in human life. Rather than reading Wittgenstein as suggesting an outright ban on theorizing about religion, Clack argues that the main point of the "Remarks" is to show how ordinary ritual practices are in any person's life. For Cioffi, the main point of the "Remarks on Frazer" is the importance of "self-clarification." Like many interpreters, Cioffi reads Wittgenstein as emphasizing the importance of self-clarification; however, Cioffi adds that empirical investigation can clarify further the object under study.

I have no major objections to the directions of these three interpretations of the "Remarks," so far as they go, but what I would like to bring to this conversation is the idea that since Wittgenstein conceives of language as collections of social practices, and thus that meaning is located within social practices, historical and sociological study can help better identify the local context of meaning (*part* of what might be called the grammar of the social practices in question). Wittgenstein was typically uninterested in the historical explanations of practices, but descriptions that draw upon the resources of history can help foreclose on what otherwise might be plausible interpretations of the practices under study. Following Phillips, we must be aware of the limits of such third-person studies, but it is undeniable that they help us better appreciate the local and historically contingent dynamics of philosophical and religious participation or disputation. Following Clack, we ought to remember that performing rituals or ceremonies is a part of what it means to be human according to Wittgenstein; what is under investigation in the study of religious practices can never be wholly alien to the scholar. Following Cioffi, we should recognize that the clarity Wittgenstein counseled is best achieved through the combination of self-clarification and empirical investigation. Getting one's questions right is a large part of Wittgenstein's direction on thought, but Wittgenstein need not be read as offering an account of religious practices that precludes the usefulness of historical and sociological studies of religions.

The "Remarks" are somewhat problematic in this regard as they were completed over a period of perhaps twelve years (between 1936 and 48).[2] Much of the text we have consists of Wittgenstein's objections to the characterizations of religious life offered by Frazer. Wittgenstein objects to Frazer's explanations of the practices of "primitive" human cultures as errors: "Frazer's account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes these views look like *errors*. Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*? But—one might say—if he was not

in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else—whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But *none* of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory."[3]

Many readers focus on these early remarks (from the first page) as stating the essence of Wittgenstein's views on religion and culture.[4] The standard interpretation holds that the human sciences, such as anthropology or religious studies, should seek only to describe practices and never to explain them. The anthropologist's explanation projects rationality onto the "primitive" culture thus suggesting the people under study as being foolish or stupid for their supernatural beliefs and superstitious practices. Religious and magical practices may thus be thought of as "folk" science on Frazer's view. Instead of explaining religious practices, scholars of religion have taken their duty to be to merely describe religious phenomena in as rich a fashion as they are able. Although Wittgenstein's rhetoric is quite strong at points in this short piece, I don't think this dominant reading emphasizing description alone is correct.

In the "Remarks," Wittgenstein does seem to challenge the very idea of an explanation of human activity. There are too many variables, too many factors that combine to produce organized human social activity that one should scrupulously question whether one is analyzing things as they really are. Frazer proposes to explain human behavior by hypothesizing the beliefs that would rationalize observed behavior. The desire to understand is laudable; there is nothing wrong with it so far as it goes. But as the philosopher Donald Davidson would later argue, in order to successfully interpret human language, one *must* presuppose the rational competence of the tribe one has encountered. Otherwise, it would be impossible to decipher the instances of language use in social situations. Of course, in Davidson's account of radical interpretation, the problem is that one is tasked with interpreting the linguistic behavior of a tribe about which one has no prior knowledge. The presumption of rational competence (i.e. that most of the beliefs, as expressed in language, of the tribe members are true) is a prerequisite of the assigning of meanings to utterances.[5] With a culture where prior contact has been made the suspension of inherited interpretations may be necessary and the presumption of rational competence reapplied. According to Wittgenstein's examples, this Frazer has not done. As several commentators have observed, Wittgenstein is not himself a generous reader of Frazer. After all, Frazer aspires to a kind of intellectual humility in proposing hypotheses that he is aware are at best of high probability of truth. Yet the intellectual virtue Wittgenstein seeks to express in the "Remarks" is of a different sort. Awareness of the limits of empirical investigation is only part of Wittgenstein's counsel here; the other part concerns the character of the one seeking explanations in the first place. This intellectual character includes the extent to which one lets a prevailing prejudice organize the very information being amassed in one's empirical investigation.

Wittgenstein counters Frazer by saying that religious believers were in error only when they put forth a theory. It's hard to know precisely what this means. Is it part of Wittgenstein's tendency towards metaphysical quietism (i.e. his tendency to eschew theorizing and simply describe that which is under investigation)? Is it reflective of Wittgenstein's sensibilities about the inability of human beings to escape the boundaries

of language and thought? It could be, but I'd like to direct our attention to a more restrained conclusion: theories, i.e. hypotheses, are linguistic artifacts of a certain range of human behaviors. There is, one might say, a natural history of language and hypotheses are themselves products of that history: "An entire mythology is stored within our language."[6] One reason it is hard to be religious after exposure to and integration into a culture where modern science more and more comes to exemplify the proper expression of rationality is that one begins to play the language-games of forming and confirming hypotheses. As expressions of religious belief or descriptions of religious practices become more systematized, their character changes. This too one might call part of the natural history of religions. Nevertheless, insofar as language retains fragments of previous ways of life, a *purely* modern or secular worldview is an illusion. By using a language, a person participates in a history and a culture even as that history and culture are formed by the use of that language.

The remark on Augustine and error seems to suggest that Wittgenstein's philosophy precludes criticism of a way of life, however, a closer reading suggests another view. Consider the following remark: "It can indeed happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized an error on which it was based. But this happens only when calling someone's attention to his error is enough to turn him from his way of behaving. But this is not the case with the religious practices of a people and *therefore* there is *no* question of an error."[7]

This passage suggests two things: while it is possible of course to be in error about the basis on which a practice is grounded, recognizing the error may not by itself be enough to change behavior. Some comparison with other texts in Wittgenstein's corpus may help show what he may have meant here. Consider Wittgenstein's remarks in the "Lectures on Religious Belief" on the role of pictures in belief formation and revision or from *Culture and Value* on religious belief being like a passionate commitment to a frame of reference. [8] In the third lecture, Wittgenstein concludes with a discussion of the role of "pictures" in organizing religious beliefs and expressions. An understanding of the picture in question – such as "God's eye sees everything" – can help the interpreter grasp the meaning but also the connectedness of religious beliefs. Yet, while religious beliefs are connected, they are not typically systematic: "Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God?"[9] In mentioning passionate commitment in connection with religious belief, Wittgenstein emphasizes that religious beliefs are not merely cognitive. Their emotional nature as well as their practical nature also merits emphasis. Faith is an act and not a passive mental state for Wittgenstein. One reason why discovering an error may not be enough to change a practice is that it may not be adequate to cause the epistemic agent to abandon the frame of reference, or picture, that has grounded her beliefs (religious or otherwise).

Second, the passages above offer a bare suggestion of how Wittgenstein would make sense of the practices of a people. As Clack would argue, human beings perform rituals because of their embodiedness and because of the inevitability of the cycles of life (to which I would add the collective negotiation of these cycles in social settings). What Wittgenstein wishes not to explain away is the sheer facticity of human ritual behavior. What he seeks

to take as a given is that humans participate in ritualized behaviors; indeed, such rituals form much of the routinized social behaviors that make up languages. While this embodied appreciation for religion is not typically emphasized in his other writings on religion, it coheres with themes in his later philosophy.

This is not to say that Wittgenstein had a philosophy of embodiment. Rather, I am arguing that his philosophy pointed in that direction. Wittgenstein would be provoked by something he heard or read. No doubt, this is why he was so effective as a philosophical conversationalist. Some commentators on Wittgenstein construe his thought systematically. These projects have value—as expressions of their authors' philosophical ideas—but, in doing so, they distort the reactive character of Wittgenstein's thought. In reaction to Frazer, this embodied dimension of Wittgenstein's thought comes to the foreground. But this does not mean it should *dominate* our reading of Wittgenstein. However, one could construct a philosophy of embodiment using elements from Wittgenstein's philosophy.[10] Resources for such a view are found, among other places, in Wittgenstein's remarks on private languages in *Philosophical Investigations*. These remarks perform a *reductio* of the view of the independent Cartesian observer of conscious experience. If "the Cartesian theater"[11] is not a good model for the mind, then perhaps a more embodied view of consciousness is. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein also emphasizes gestures as part of linguistic practice. Indeed, they are very important to Wittgenstein's descriptions of language-games.[12] In *On Certainty*, the treatment of doubt portrays human beings as embodied epistemic agents before they become skeptics. The ideas expressed in the "Remarks" are thus consistent with these elements in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Wittgenstein also contemplates in the "Remarks" a theme that would come to be the central theme of his philosophy: perspicuity. He writes: "And so the chorus points to a secret law" one feels like saying to Frazer's collection of facts. I *can* represent this law, this idea, by means of an evolutionary hypothesis, or also, analogously to the schema of a plant, by means of the schema of a religious ceremony, but also by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a '*perspicuous'* representation. The concept of perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It denotes the form of our representation, the way we see things. (A similar kind of '*Weltanschauung'* is apparently typical of our time. Spengler.) This perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we "see the connections". Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*.[13]

As has been noted by others, this passage appears in modified form in *Philosophical Investigations*: "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connexions'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*. The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?)" [14]

P. M. S. Hacker observes a shift between the two iterations of the principle, from the "comment on anthropological hermeneutics" of the "Remarks" to the comment on "philosophical method" in the *Investigations*.[15] Perspicuous representations are helpful when one seeks to resolve confusion. By aspiring to simply describe what is happening, one can avoid tempting theoretical constructions that may cloud one's view of other possibilities. Bracketing an organizing idea, what Wittgenstein calls elsewhere a "picture", may aid one in perceiving aspects of the objects of study otherwise overlooked. Being reminded of the location of language or practice within a larger social setting is one example of how this pursuit of perspicuity goes in Wittgenstein's mature philosophy (recall Wittgenstein's listing of all the varieties of language-games in the *Investigations*). Perspicuous representations challenge the tendency of language to guide us too quickly into explanations of how it *must* be. Yet this bracketing should be tempered with the idea that the array of facts about one's object of inquiry "may point to a secret law". There may be a natural pattern behind the phenomena and the perspicuous representation highlights the connections among phenomena. Wittgenstein continues: "But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the *facts*. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen the eye for a formal connection."[16]

There is no general form for perspicuous representations; their form depends on the nature of the particular conceptual confusion or state of uncertainty one finds oneself in. This is, no doubt, a familiar observation among interpreters of cultures or texts. Any retelling of a story necessarily highlights some features and downplays others. Local preferences for narrative genre will also exert additional constraints on representation. Again, there is nothing wrong with the desire or effort to understand—Wittgenstein is denying neither that there are underlying natural laws, nor that we can grasp them—but clarity about one's interpretive location, one's embodiment as an observer is of crucial importance for Wittgenstein in these remarks.

If religious practices do not constitute "folk science" as on Frazer's view, then might they be merely expressive acts (i.e. acts with an emotive but no cognitive value). Wittgenstein writes: "When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. "I am venting my anger". And all rites are of this kind. Such actions may be called Instinct-actions.—And an historical explanation, say, that I or my ancestors previously believed that beating the ground does help is shadow-boxing, for it is a superfluous assumption that explains *nothing*. The similarity of the action to an act of punishment is important, but nothing more than this similarity can be asserted. Once such a phenomenon is brought into connection with an instinct which I myself possess, this is precisely the explanation wished for; that is, the explanation which resolves this particular difficulty. And a further investigation about the history of my instinct moves on another track."[17]

Remarks such as these do seem to indicate something like an emotivist position with respect to the nature of various actions of a religious or ceremonial sort (be they *speech* acts or not). Striking the ground as a means of venting anger seems to suggest a view of the nature of religious expression as driven by emotions rather than fact-based discourse. However, with Clack, we should caution ourselves against such a reading. Wittgenstein's "venting his anger" is a practice alongside others and telling him it is not effective against the object of his anger is pointless. Emotivist readings of religious beliefs or practices tend to be reductive, it is unlikely that this is what Wittgenstein is defending. Instead, I would suggest that Wittgenstein writes to show only that irrational practices are ubiquitous in human experience and that they need not reflect a calculation of causation. All practices are not themselves attempts at pseudo-science.

In the "Remarks," readers are presented with a picture of what pursuing clarity amounts to. Can something be said in general about this ethic of perspicuity? What does it identify as responsibilities, and how is it practiced? When consulting different texts in Wittgenstein's corpus one sees different strategies in use. In Wittgenstein's sources such as *Culture and Value*, the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*", and *Philosophical Investigations*, perspicuity concerns identifying the grammar (including the use) of an expression. But this is not the end of it. Philosophical clarity was a matter of intellectual virtue for Wittgenstein and he searched for religious insights that might be edifying to his philosophical practice. These methods were used as a part of philosophical therapy, as a means of uprooting habits of thought that tend to reproduce error or confusion.

Achieving perspicuity about representations is no easy task, and no doubt, its work is never done. Appreciating that the observer, too, is a human being is a recurring point in Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*". Wittgenstein muses over the idea "Man is a ceremonial animal;"[18] while he doesn't think this is quite right, he does think it captures a truth. Ritual practices are an ordinary aspect of human experience. Wittgenstein deters smugness on the part of the philosopher or scholar of religions. Serious self-scrutiny is as much a part of Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook as is the scrutiny of the intended objects of study.

Wittgenstein counseled his students to avoid careers in philosophy. He took the temptations to compromise one's integrity—as an intellectual or as a person, which for Wittgenstein amounted to the same thing—to be very powerful. In part this temptation stems from the need to formulate and defend hypotheses. When practiced properly, the philosopher should not lose confidence in her perspicuity and accept designations that do not properly fit the objects under study. Resistance to a lack of clarity could be thought of as one of the signature marks of a philosopher under this conception of the discipline. To this should be added the Wittgensteinian emphasis on the observation of difference and variation, and the awareness that even the very terms by means of which we seek to grasp human religious life have a natural history. According to this picture of philosophy, the work of interpreting religious practices and beliefs is never complete and should always remain open to critique, modification or refutation from the broader community of inquirers.

Notes:

1. See, among other publications, D. Z Phillips. *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, Brian R Clack. *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, and Frank Cioffi. *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

2. Clack dates the beginning of the text to 1931, but most other sources list 1936.

3. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*. Edited by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, New York: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990, p. 119.

4. See Brian R. Clack's observation of this point in his "Wittgenstein and Magic," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis, New York: Routledge, 2001.

5. See Donald Davidson's "Radical Interpretation." *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, pp. 125-40.

6. Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough* ," p. 133.

7. Ibid., p. 121.

8. See Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, p. 72, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value, Revised Edition*. Edited by G. H. von Wright. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998, p. 73e.

9. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 71.

10. Sarah Coakley appeals to Wittgenstein in just such an approach in her *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Gender, and Philosophy*. Blackwell: London, 2002. See especially chapter eight on "the spiritual senses."

11. See Daniel C. Dennett. *Consciousness Explained*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1991.

12. Text reference.

13. Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," p. 133.

14. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1953, §122.

15. Hacker, P. M. S. *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 75.

16. Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough* ," p. 133.

17. Ibid., pp. 137ff.

18. Ibid., p. 129.

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