

Wittgenstein and the Savages

Some Thoughts on the Ethnographical Method in his Later Work

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1 Introduction

A curious site presents itself to the reader of the later Wittgenstein. Is Wittgenstein going on expedition again? Indeed, the professor has stuffed the mosquito net, sturdy safari helmet and machete into a brown briefcase and is heading for his leather armchair. From there, he proclaims, he shall investigate the most exotic peoples known and unknown to man. How does Wittgenstein deem this possible, one might ask. The present essay is an attempt to offer some take on why Wittgenstein's manifold anthropological ventures never extended - in fact, never had to extend - beyond the convenience of his office.

Throughout his later writing Wittgenstein frequently assumed what might be called an *ethnological stance*. In these moments Wittgenstein mimicks the anthropologist visiting an entirely foreign people to study life and behavior of the humans there to be found. In the hypothesized position of a complete stranger he investigates some phenomenon he himself conjured up. Many examples include investigations into aspects of a completely unknown language, as in PI 206:

[...] Denke, du kämst als Forscher in ein unbekanntes Land mit einer dir gänzlich fremden Sprache.

or this in PI 243:

Man könntes sich auch Menschen denken, die nur monologisch sprächen.
[...] Einem Forscher, der sie beobachtet und ihre Reden belauscht, könnte es gelingen, ihre Sprache in die unsre übersetzen.

or in PI 207:

Denken wir uns, die Leute in jenem Land verrichteten gewöhnliche menschliche Tätigkeiten und bedienen sich dabei, wie es scheint, einer artikulierten Sprache.

At various times he uses the picture of the wild tribe to somehow imagine customs that are a far cry from what he and his contemporary peers were used to, as in OC 264, when he even puts Moore in some hypothesized confrontation with the "savages":

Ich könnte mir den Fall denken, dass Moore von einem wilden Volksstamm gefangen genommen wird[...].

At the same time, Wittgenstein wrote an extensive critique of James George Frazer's monumental comparative study of religion and mythology he found throughout the world. Frazer's account is definitely one of practical - not hypothesised - nature, while there is no indication that Wittgenstein ever engaged in actual field work. This then makes Wittgenstein's comments on Frazer's work a critique of practical anthropology and the question arises how these are related to his own purely ideal approach. The central thesis of this essay is that for Wittgenstein's philosophical intentions there is no sensible distinction between classical, laboriously collected, anthropological data and insights gathered from thought experiments. To make this plausible I want to assess and compare Wittgenstein's views on the instance of Frazer's actual practice of anthropology - as manifested in his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* - with the his own use of speculative ethnology. To slightly rephrase my question: How does Wittgenstein's use of these ethnological thought experiments relate to his remarks on Frazer's actual ethnographic work?

Quite evidently Wittgenstein's primary business does not at all coincide with what anthropologist usually do. He does not engage in any of the tasks that is normally associated with that field (describing people, customs, social structure, culture or attempting to make comprehensible or "translating" between worldviews etc.). A first relevant question, then, must concern the purpose of his hypothesised ethnological field trips. In Section 2 I will try to give some rough account of the use Wittgenstein makes of this philosophical device. I will also cursorely come to speak of his reception in the field of anthropology. Section 3 will be concerned with tracing Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* and their relation to the findings of the previous section. Can Wittgenstein's views on the proper place of anthropological description as well as his own supposed ethnographic investigations be accommodated within his wider philosophical views? Finally, Section 4 concludes and Section 5 contains the bibliography.

2 Philosophy as Anthropology

Intro Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a powerful conception of human language use. Scholarly opinion on the correct interpretation of Wittgenstein's writings varies widely. At the present moment, I will obviously not be able to develop a thorough or convincing account myself. In the light of the discussion of Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer, however, I think a rough presentation of some exegetical views are pertinent. Therefore, I have decided to sketch two interpretations which overall disagree on many counts how Wittgenstein ought to be read. But most important to the present essay is their rift on the role of Wittgenstein's views on the matters of language use, acquisition, linguistic meaning etc. - short and overly simple: his philosophy of language (and whatever is tied to it) - in the context of all of his philosophy.

First, I will present aspects of Peter Hacker's interpretation, and then, secondly, come to speak of Keith Dromm's take. Interestingly both interpreters offer an interesting - albeit vastly different - basis from which to assess Wittgenstein's comments on the work of Frazer. As that is what I am ultimately interested in, my rendering of both Dromm and Hacker will be quite selective.

Hacker Peter Hacker's interpretation, for one, sees language use as a variety of rule-governed activities in human communities. Within and for these *language-games*, interlocutors learn the correct application of concepts and response to their uttering of words, how to give explanations appropriate to the context etc. In short, the learning of a language consists in mastering the technique of its usage. Just as human beings use tools in the context of their everyday activities, language users perform acts with words in the context of their communal lives.

Hacker points to sections as the following to sustain his views: "Das Wort "Sprachspiel" soll hervorheben, dass das *Sprechen* der Sprache ein Teil ist einer Tätigkeit, oder einer Lebensform."

Thus human language is conceived to be centered in practice. This practice takes place in the *flow of life*, in the human community of family at first and broader society later. The concepts employed across different places, times, communities or societal subgroups arise from a shared way of living. From elementary human needs to highly contingent circumstances of one particular form of co-existence and everything between these extremes, all these factors go into producing the particular concepts used by some group of humans.

On this view of language, part of the reason Wittgenstein frequently recurs to an *anthropological* or *ethnological* stance when describing and reflecting on philosophical issues is because it is intimately tied to the "life and behavior" of different people. For the fact that words and phrases have meaning at all, is tied to the existence of rules governing the correct use of words. If there were no standards to discern correct from incorrect application of a word, it would be meaningless. Thus acquiring and using a language is in a very important sense a normative practice. The community of language users constantly shapes what the language-games in use, expands old ones and abolishes moves deemed once legal.

If one follows this rough interpretation of Wittgenstein which stresses the rootedness of language and meaning in practical, natural context within which it is being put to use, then it would come quite naturally to study language as a quasi-anthropologist - as somebody who studies humans.

So concepts are human creations, governed by rules stipulated, controlled and inculcated by humans. As Hacker points out, however, it seems that Wittgenstein is not primarily interested in analysing the actual history of the concepts familiar to him. (a possible exception might be his work in *On Certainty*). So although he argues for the tantamount importance of viewing the grammar of the language we happen to do philosophy with as a historical product, he does not seem to see himself as a historian of that grammar. Wittgenstein reflects on the relation between concept-formation and historical considerations in the

Philosophy of Psychology:

That human beings use language, engage in language-games, perform acts of speech in the context of their activities - these are anthropological facts about the nature history of man.

Calling Wittgenstein's later approach to philosophy "ethnological" or "anthropological" is warranted by is the perspective from which he views matters related to concepts - their formation, acquisition, employment etc.

To sum up the main point of this, Hacker takes Wittgenstein to put forward some linguistic theory that explains the emergence of meaning, language acquisition and so forth. Ultimately, this obtains an the flavour of a very general anthropological account because...**what to write here? consult hacker paper**

Dromm We can resist the temptation to read Wittgenstein's as making empirical or naturalistic claims of some sort in his later writings by, first, recognizing the scope of his interest. He is interested in the grammar of our language-games for the purpose of deciding on answers to questions about scepticism, meaning, understanding, rationality etc. The observations he makes about grammar hold regardless of the truth of the empirical theories he describes. Second, to understand the role played by these empirical theories requires our seeing how simply being able to imagine them tells us something important about the grammar of the language-game for which they are imagined. According to Dromm Wittgenstein should not be understood to issue empirical claims about biology, the nature of human societies etc. He is not referring to facts about the human physical or societal condition when he talks of "natural history" (PI 25,415). Dromm claims that although Wittgenstein does offer a theory of language, this must be understood as him demonstrating one *possible* theory. Wittgenstein does not put it forward hoping that it will be accepted as true, as the Dromm takes his opponents to claim, but merely shows the *possibility* of this specific account. Wittgenstein doesn't affirm one theory, he merely invites his readership to imagine one possible account. And by imagining one possible theory of language, essential features of the phenomenon in question are made salient. By imagining different possible forms of life where different language-games are being played.

The basic form of the game can't include doubt. What we are doing here above all is to imagine a basic form: a possibility, indeed a very important possibility. (We very often confuse what is an important possibility with historical reality.)

Dromm moreover claims that these hypothetical language-games, especially regarding terms like "natural history" or "form of life", are no empirical claims related to the study of human behavior. Dromm takes them only to describe the fact that the language-games we know could also be thought of differently.

That this is one possibility, that we can imagine that our language developed in this way, is supposed to compel us to recognize those important grammatical features of first-person sensation talk that I reviewed before. ... The possibility Wittgenstein describes is not meant to contribute to an understanding of linguistic development or acquisition - what interest would this serve? - but to highlight the similar grammars of the basic form and our more sophisticated language-game. p. 683

And he is not saying that these moves (i.e primitive reactions) are historically antecedent to the language-game; rather, they are logically antecedent. p. 685

Concerning justification: The key to understanding this, is not to take it to be saying something about human behavior - as Hacker might want it - but instead as saying something about the grammar of a language-game. p.686

But Wittgenstein never told how or where justifications end; only that they will end somewhere. p. 687

3 Anthropological Remarks on Frazer

Intro - Proper Reading, Frazer's condescending stance, Wiggy's use of "savage" The following section uses a small amount of passages from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* to shed some light on Wittgenstein's use of anthropological thought experiments. Moreover, the usage Wittgenstein makes of this device is supposed to shed some light of the larger context of his philosophy.

It must be noted that whether Wittgenstein's reading of Frazer's work is fair or accurate bears no importance on the present essay. As the interest is neither Frazer's work itself, nor really Wittgenstein's opinion of it as an anthropological study, but merely the insight we can obtain from it into Wittgenstein's own philosophy.

First it must be noted that Wittgenstein attacks Frazer on several counts, not all of which are directly pertinent now. The modes in which he advances his multitude of critique also vary; some points of critique he voices explicitly, others take the form of thinly veiled sarcasm. A nice example of the latter can be found in his statement that Frazer is

"[...] much more savage than most of his savages[...]"

Indeed, Wittgenstein seems to take issue with the condescension he views in how Frazer describes and reasons about the people he studies. Consider the following passage, for example, where Wittgenstein harshly questions Frazer's conceptual assumptions behind his attempt to provide *explanations* practices foreign to him:

"The very idea of wanting to explain a practice - for example, the killing of the priest-king - seems wrong to me. All that Frazer does

is to make them plausible to people who think as he does. It is very remarkable that in the final analysis all these practices are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity.”

There are various passages like the one just given in which Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer for basing his *explanation* on the assumption that the people under study are somehow - culturally or cognitively - deficient. For fairness' sake it must be admitted, however, that it is not entirely clear Wittgenstein himself was free of such prejudice. At times it appears that he operates with a normative distinction between civilized and (still) culturally primitive people, as in PI 194:

When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it.

Also, Wittgenstein adopts the term "savages" throughout his remarks on Frazer - albeit he seems to do so reluctantly. Some commentators have suggested that this is part of an attempt to re-coin the disparaging term or an ironic usage of it.

As far as this essay is concerned perhaps the most crucial aspect of Wittgenstein's attack on Frazer's stance towards the people that are the objects of his studies is "how impossible it was for him to conceive of a life different from that of England of his time.". A series of remarks to this effect play the central role in the relation between anthropological thought experiments and Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer's ethnological accounts. I will come to speak of them in more depth in a moment, but before I would like to give a slightly more complete picture of Wittgenstein's views on the anthropological stance in *The Golden Bough*.

Glance at criticism of Frazer: poor explanation as explanation, misguided explanation bc of wrong dichotomy of belief and act I want to take a brief look at Wittgenstein's main points of contention with Frazer's account of religious and magical views and practices across the world. There are principally two types of criticism concerning Frazer's analysis of ritual practices.

The first type of critique accepts the claim attributed to Frazer that there are two separate constitutive elements of a ritual. Namely, a practical part and a theoretical or belief-related part that serves an explanatory purpose. Wittgenstein reads Frazer as to postulate a dichotomy between the acts - motions, gestures, chants etc. - that are (observably) carried out when the ritual is performed on the one hand, and the beliefs - historical narratives or underlying theoretical explanation, in a way like a spiritual mechanics - on the other. Furthermore, the acts performed throughout the ritual follow from the beliefs or views. In order to provide an explanation of the rituals in question, Frazer is thus portrayed as ascribing beliefs to the people whom he observes performing some ritual. This then yields an account of ritualistic and magic practices as some kind of pseudo-science, a primitive prototype that has yet to evolve to the more refined scientific method known in England at the time.

Supposing this dichotomy, that practice and theory can be intelligibly separated, then, Wittgenstein replies that this is simply a bad explanation of the phenomena in question. For it supposes that the people performing the rituals hold vastly erroneous beliefs across the board.¹

Frazer's account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes the views look like *errors*.

This ascription of false beliefs fits well with Frazer's condescension: For his explanation to work he needs to assume that the people whose rituals he analyses are not able to realize the blatant stupidity of their beliefs. Wittgenstein provides a fine example of how little such an explanatory scheme actually explains. He draws attention to the absurdity of ascribing the belief that a rain-ritual will causally bring about rain to people who are performing it right at the start of the rainy season.

The second type of contention concerns not the internal consistency of Frazer's dissolution of rituals into two separate parts. Wittgenstein rejects the separation of rituals into actions and views altogether. In fact, the very attempt of extracting some *explanation* strikes him as dubious.

Furthermore, the analysis of rituals, the understanding of rituals is in essence understanding of what we are, irrespective of cultural differences. A particular culture or civilization is just some specific and contingent expression of fundamental, absolute human values.

Key passage: Frazer can't imagine that it could be different, inventing primitive practices This leads right up to the main element I would like to extract from Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer. Right after giving a series of examples where reading one or another ritual in a scientific manner seems ludicrous to him, Wittgenstein makes the following exclamation:

[H]ow impossible it was for [Frazer] to conceive of a life different from that of England of his time! [...] Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically a present-day English parson with the same stupidity and dullness.

I want to argue that several issues are at stake here. For one, Wittgenstein's issue with Frazer's inability to shed his personal point of view to a sufficient degree goes back to the criticism of Frazer's ethnological work. That Frazer takes what is known to him and ineptly transfers it to construct poor explanation, that is, bad even on his own terms, of the phenomena he writes about. A further issue goes to the heart of the matter of what this essay is attempting to convey. Namely, that Wittgenstein's exasperation with Frazer's lack of imagination is related to a tool or method Wittgenstein likes to use in his own philosophical work. And "to conceive of a life different" is the central element by which the tool functions. So to study the attack on Frazer in this respect goes quite a

¹I am reminded of Davidson's thought that, in order to interpret the acts of some unknown group, we need to view their beliefs as largely true and rational.

long way in making sense of Wittgenstein's use of fabricated anthropological scenarios throughout the PI or the OC.

There are three crucial claims Wittgenstein makes one paragraph below the passage quoted above. First, that anything we could come up with when imagining possible practices, they might just exist.

One sees how misleading Frazer's explanations are [...] by noting that one could very easily invent primitive practices oneself, and it would be pure luck if they were not actually found somewhere.

So, Wittgenstein notes, there is no principled difference between his thought experiments about how a society could be constituted and actual anthropological data. Imagination serves just as well. The second claim holds that the principle - the underlying traits of human beings involved in rituals - follow some pattern or *general principle*. There is a common thread through all societies and their ritualistic practices. This quote follows the last one immediately.

That is, the principle according to which these practices are arranged is a much more general one than in Frazer's explanation and it is present in our own minds, so that we ourselves could think up all the possibilities.

The third claim is related to the first and can be found in the latter part of the quote just given. All the imagined scenarios we may construct somehow instantiate or follow the same *general principles* embedded in all human minds.

When putting these claims together we obtain a valid tool to investigate "the principle according to which these practices are arranged" of all the ritualistic practices of humankind. Without even having to check whether some conjured up example are or were actually existing at some point and place we can investigate the overarching, structural commonalities of all these rituals. The reason this is a valid and generally applicable method, according to Wittgenstein, is because we - human beings - are all in possession of the same kind of mind and, in virtue of this equally powerful mind, in the position to imagine all possible practices.

TLP: isomorphism between structure of the world and the structure of thought. Wittgenstein's exploration of this ramification of his thought is very brief at this point in time. We might conjecture that some remnant from the Tractatus' idea that thought and world are structurally isomorphic lies behind Wittgenstein's confidence in the universal extension of imaginative powers.

human generalities, kinship with savages In addition to the very strong claims given in the last paragraph Wittgenstein tries at multiple times throughout the remarks on Frazer to argue for the fundamental likeness between "us" and "the savages". In some passage he speaks of "kinship" between people and he seems to mock Frazer at various points for trying to construct a difference where there really is none to be found.

Shortly after the threefold claim concerning the universal access to the realm of possible rituals he offers the following commonality between all humans. I is especially pertinent to the argument because it is more concrete as to what commonalities he has in mind and how these could lead to different people inventing practices that are similar in fundamental structure.

There are dangers connected with eating and drinking, not only for savages, but also for us; nothing is more natural than the desire to protect oneself from these; and now we could devise such a preventative measure ourselves. - But according to what principle are we to invent them? Obviously, according to the one by which all dangers are reduced to the form of a few very simple ones which are immediately evident to man.

elaborate!

fit this in somewhere: That is, one could begin a book on anthropology by saying: When one examines the life and behavior of mankind throughout the world, one sees that, except for what might be called animal activities, such as ingestion, etc., etc., etc., men also perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions. Explains palpable irateness Wittgenstein has towards Frazer. Because they are essentially in the same business - explaining humans - and their data is, in Wittgenstein's view, equally valid, their differences in analysis are directly comparable.

4 Conclusion

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5 References

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