# Comment

## A Ceremonial Animal

'One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal, *ein zeremonielles Tier*', so Ludwig Wittgenstein noted in 1931 as he riffled through the first volume of the Cambridge Union copy of *The Golden Bough* with his friend M. O'C. Drury (see *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* edited by James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann: 115–155, 129).

It was Wittgenstein's idea that they should look at Frazer. It seems an act of desperation. He knew by this time that, given the logical-positivist gloss put on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by philosophers in Vienna, something was far wrong with what he had taken to be his 'final solution' of the problems of philosophy. He read poetry to them: Rabindranath Tagore for example. He returned to Cambridge, in January 1929, to 'stay permanently'. He had no degree, but was allowed to submit the *Tractatus* ('a work of genius; but, be that as it may, certainly well up to the standard required for the Cambridge degree of Doctor of Philosophy', as G.E. Moore's report famously said). He struck up a friendship with Gilbert Ryle: they were to go on walking holidays together. Marguerite Respinger was making it clear she would not marry him, though he was slow to understand this. He planned to write his autobiography. He gave (as it turned out) his one and only lecture on ethics, to a general audience in Cambridge in November 1929. Back in Vienna he referred sympathetically in discussions to Augustine, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. He dictated to Friedrich Waismann, for a book they planned to write jointly, a new position in philosophy that seems remarkably like logical-positivist verificationism. In these and other ways Wittgenstein was evidently on the brink of new departures (in April 1929 he turned forty).

Ethics, aesthetics and religion, as no one who recalls the concluding sections of the *Tractatus* should be surprised to find, provided the context for reconsidering the obviously unsolved philosophical problems. In 1930, over Christmas in Vienna, Wittgenstein talked, to Waismann among others, about the uselessness of supplying underlying 'theories' to explain ethics, aesthetics, and religion, as well as mathematics and philosophy. 'I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions, in which there is thus no talking', he asserted, modifying this somewhat by continuing (as Waismann records): 'Obviously the essence of religion cannot have anything to do with the fact that there is talking, or rather: when people talk, then this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory'.

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In other words, religion may indeed include doctrinal propositions but it does not rest on any kind of 'theory'.

We don't know why Wittgenstein suddenly wanted to read *The Golden Bough*. Though members of the same college in Cambridge he and the author never met. James George Frazer (1854–1941), a classical scholar and omnivorous reader, was, of course, the greatest anthropologist of religion at the time. He worked entirely from his chair: the wonderful opening description of the wooded shores of Lake Nemi, for instance, where the priest-king was sacrificed every year by his successor, was evidently based on the view over the Clyde from the windows of his boyhood home in Helensburgh. Presumably Wittgenstein was intrigued by Frazer's enormous influence on the Cambridge classicists of the day, as well as on writers as different as T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence. In the event, he was quickly enraged by Frazer's 'explanations' of the religious practices he describes – explanations that are 'much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves'.

When we contemplate the ways in which human beings live, all across the world, Wittgenstein thinks, we find that human beings, as well as much else, 'perform actions which have a character peculiar to themselves and which one could call *ritual*'. It would be nonsense to say that such actions characteristically arise from faulty theories about the world, as he takes Frazer to hold. Rather, what is characteristic of religious practices is that they are not based on views, opinions, or theories, of any kind – 'whether true or false'.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy is, largely, a series of attempts to persuade his readers that most of the distinctively human things we do stand in no need of justification by any kind of theory: 'I am not of the *opinion* that [you] have a soul'; 'Language is not the result of any kind of *ratiocination*'; and suchlike, to quote his best known slogans. For all the total absence of any discussion of religion in his *Philosophical Investigations*, his reaction to Frazer's descriptions of primitive religious rituals played a key role in redirecting Wittgenstein's way of understanding what it is like to be our kind of animal.

Wittgenstein probably never read anything by G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936). Yet, especially in *Heretics*, first published in 1905, inveighing against what he took to be the utopian and utilitarian dogmas of the day, Chesterton attacked the notion that 'rites and forms are something artificial, additional, and corrupt': on the contrary 'man was a ritualist before he could speak'. 'Ritual is really much older than thought; it is much simpler and much wilder than thought'. He even defends the Salvation Army: 'really the old voice of glad and angry faith, hot as the riots of Dionysius, wild as the gargoyles of Catholicism, not to be mistaken for a philosophy' – no mere theory, so to say. Eventually, in 1922, Chesterton became a Catholic – no wonder.

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