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Das Verstehen des Anderen

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Wittgenstein on the Sinister and Dreadful in Alien Practices[1]

Zusammenfassung

In seinen „Bemerkungen zu Frazers *Goldenem Zweig*" kritisiert Wittgenstein die Unfähigkeit des Religionsforschers, andere Lebens- und Denkweisen als die eines Engländers zu verstehen. Zugleich verfehle Frazer mit seiner Methode der historisch-kausalen Erklärung unser eigentliches Interesse an fremden Religionen. Aus diesen Bemerkungen, die sich mit einem neueren Trend in der Ethnologie berühren, lassen sich zwei methodische Ansätze zum Verstehen fremder Lebensweisen herauslesen, nämlich die von Wittgenstein ausdrücklich vertretene, eher phänomenologische Methode der Gruppierung von Tatsachen in einer *übersichtlichen Darstellung*, die ihren *allgemeinen* Inhalt herausstellen soll, sowie eine hiermit schwer vereinbare Methode der Rückbindung des eigenen intuitiven Verstehens an die jeweilige *sprachliche Darstellung* des Fremden und die begrenzten *Informationen* über den Kontext. Gegen Wittgenstein wird die Auffassung vertreten, daß seine quasi-phänomenologische Auffassung von der Erfahrung des Fremden nicht geeigneter ist, fremde Lebensweisen zu verstehen, als die Methode Frazers, da sie keine Möglichkeit bietet, die Projektion eigenkulturell bedingter Bedürfnisse nach „Tiefe" am ethnologischen Material zu überprüfen. Vielversprechender für die Kulturwissenschaften erscheint hingegen Wittgensteins zweiter Ansatz, der unser Interesse und unseren Zugang zum Fremden an dessen sprachliche Darstellung bindet. Allerdings zeigt sich anhand von ethnologischen Beispielen, daß auch dieser Ansatz nur dann Projektionen eigener Fremdheits- und Bedeutsamkeitsbedürfnisse in die fremde Kultur vermeiden kann, wenn er – gegen Wittgensteins Intention – durch eine historische und kausale Analyse ergänzt wird.

Summary

In his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (1931), Wittgenstein criticizes the cultural anthropologist Frazer for his incapability to understand ways of life different from those of a contemporary Englishman as well as for his failure to satisfy our interest in alien religious practices. The "Remarks" contain not one but two alternative methods for the understanding of alien ways of living: first, the phenomenological method of the grouping of facts in a *perspicuous representation* which is supposed to show their *general* content, and secondly, a method of relating our intuitive understanding of the point of alien practices to our *description* of them and to our *information* concerning the context. Against Wittgenstein, I will argue that his phenomenological account is not, as he thought, a better means for the understanding of alien ways of living than the method of Frazer, for it does not prevent the projection of needs and wishes typical for one's own culture on the anthropological data. Wittgenstein's second ap-

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proach seems much more promising as a method of cultural anthropology but has to be completed by a historical and causal account of the facts in order to avoid misinterpretations based on one's own need for "deep" and "strange" experiences.

Wittgenstein on Frazer

In his 12 volumes titled *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (1922), the English anthropologist James Frazer presented a story rich in imagery that especially fascinated Wittgenstein:

> In antiquity the lake of Nemi, 'was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy. On the northern shore of the lake [...] stood the sacred grove and sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis, or Diana of the Wood.[...] In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier.
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> The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king; but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his. For year in year out, in summer and winter, in fair weather and in foul, he had to keep his lonely watch, and whenever he snatched a troubled slumber it was at the peril of his life. The least relaxation of his vigilance, the smallest abatement of his strength of limb or skill of fence, put him in jeopardy; grey hairs might seal his death-warrant. [...] It is a sombre picture, set to melancholy music – the background of forest showing black and jagged against a lowering and stormy sky, the sighing of the wind in the branches, the rustle of the withered leaves under foot, and lapping of the cold water on the shore, and in the foreground, pacing to and fro, now in twilight and now in gloom, a dark figure with a glitter of steel at the shoulder whenever the pale moon, riding clear of the cloud-rack, peers down at him through the matted boughs.'[2]

In his book Frazer attempts to "explain" the strange rule of this priesthood by relating it to other information about "the early history of man" which he takes to reveal an "essential similarity" of the human mind. By combining our knowledge about the more general motives behind "early" customs with particular information about the historical background of the Nemi custom, accordingly, Frazer claims "to offer a fairly probable explanation of the priesthood of Nemi":

> If 'we can show that a barbarous custom, like that of the priesthood of Nemi, has existed elsewhere; if we can detect the motives which led to its institution; if we can prove that these motives have operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of its institutions specifically different but generically alike; if we can show, lastly, that these very motives, with some of their derivative institutions, were actually at work in classical antiquity; then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood of Nemi. Such an inference, in default of direct evidence as to how the priesthood did actually arise, can never amount to demonstration. But it will be more or less probable according to the degree of completeness with which it fulfils the conditions I have indicated.'[3]

Since the priest-kings were often considered magicians, Frazer extends his explanation to a discussion of magical practices which, as he thinks, only differ from western technology in that they are not based on the true presuppositions of western natural science but on erroneous assumptions about nature.

Although much fascinated by his description of the Nemi rite, Wittgenstein, in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*"[4] (1931), severely criticizes Frazer's explanation of magic and religion. To him Frazer's method of historical explanation, on the whole, appears totally unsatisfactory:

> 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. (RF 61)

Particularly Wittgenstein challenges Frazer's account of magical practices as the employment of certain *means in order to attain a certain goal*; practices that, according to Frazer, are to be considered "next of kin to science"[5] from which they only differ in that they follow logically from *wrong* beliefs about nature. All these practices, according to Wittgenstein, "are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity. But it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all this out of sheer stupidity." (RF 61) At the same time, however, Wittgenstein diagnoses an immense amount of "stupidity" and "dullness" in the world-view of Frazer and other contemporary Englishmen: "What a narrow spiritual life on Frazer's part!", Wittgenstein claims in his devastating appraisal of Frazer, and

> as a result: How impossible it was for him to conceive of a life different from that of the England of his time! Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically a present-day parson with the same stupidity and dullness. (RF 63)

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[2]   J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, London: MacMillan; abridged edition, 1923, 1f.

[3]   Frazer 1923, 2.

[4]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*", in: C.G. Luckhardt (ed.), *Wittgenstein. Sources and Perspectives*, Sussex: Harvester Press 1979 (henceforth quoted RF).

[5]   Frazer 1923, 50.

At first glance these remarks do not sound very different from the typical appraisal of Frazer in the lectures of contemporary cultural anthropologists where Frazer and his Victorian habits serve mainly as a yoke, demonstrating to the freshmen how ethnology may not be pursued anymore. Since Bronislaw Malinowski invented the method of "participant observation", cultural anthropologists[6] aim at understanding the native "from his own point of view"[7] in order "to gain access to other minds and other ways of life so as to represent what it is like to be a differently situated human being."[8] While it may not be completely transparent to philosophers what it means to gain access to the minds of differently situated human beings, anthropologists understand by this at least a period of field-research of more than a year in order to be "really in contact"[9] with the natives and to observe the phenomena of their lives "in their full actuality".[10] Explanations and interpretations of their behaviour have to be based on a knowledge of the "native's" own description of the world and their own criteria of rationality. In contrast to this empirically-based cultural anthropology of today, Frazer and other then authorities on alien religions came to their conclusions by a purely rational means which Evans-Pritchard called the 'If-I-was-a-horse-method'.[11] This method apparently consists mainly in *first* ascertaining a custom which appears strange and exotic and, *secondly*, searching in one's own mind, one's own experiences and one's own criteria of reasonable and unreasonable behaviour for plausible motives; if this speculative introspection does not yield any comprehensible reason for behaving so strangely, one assumes that the natives are lacking some information which westerners possess about the true course of nature.

Now it is not the lack of empirical knowledge about other ways of living and thinking that Wittgenstein criticizes in Frazer's historical explanations of strange religious practices. It is rather his inability to fully realize their *moral and emotional significance for us*. For, according to Wittgenstein, a historical explanation

[6] Within this context the terms 'ethnology' and 'cultural anthropology' are used interchangeably.

[7] Cf. Cl. Geertz, "'From the Native's point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding", in: J.L. Dolgin/D.S. Kemnitzer/D.S. Schneider (eds.), *Symbolic Anthropology*, Columbia 1977.

[8] R.A. Shweder, "True Ethnography", in: R. Jessor/A. Colby/R.A. Shweder (eds.), *Ethnography and Human Development. Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry*, Chicago 1996, 17.

[9] Br. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Illinois 1961, 7.

[10] Malinowski 1961, 18.

[11] Cf. Evans-Pritchard, *Theorien über primitive Religion*, Frankfurt a.M. 1968, 58.

of practices which strike us as dreadful just "isn't what *satisfies* us here at all",[12] and he makes himself plain:

> When Frazer begins by telling us the story of the king of the Wood of Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that he *feels*, and *wants us to feel*, that something *strange* and *dreadful* is happening. But the question 'Why does this happen?' is properly answered by saying: 'Because it is dreadful', not by giving a historical explanation of the origin's of the practice, nor by presenting wrong theoretical opinions as reasons for the practice. (RF 63; emphasis M.-S. L.)

Thus at second glance Wittgenstein' s interest in cultural anthropology and its methodological conceptions seem no less different from the methodological standpoint of Malinowskian empirical cultural anthropology than from Frazer's method of speculative introspection. As a matter of fact, it corresponds to a very recent development within cultural anthropology: the tendency to regard ethnographic descriptions as "redemptive Western allegories".[13] By challenging Frazer's explanation of magical practices as erroneous assumptions of means-end-relations, Wittgenstein aims not only at a type of explanation within the cultural sciences but at a wrong way of *understanding our own practice*. His employment of the word "deep" (tief) indicates that he regards Frazer's account of magic not only as a doubtful empirical hypothesis but as based on a *moral incapacity* to realize the difference between the superficial and the "deeper" levels of human existence. It is the custom to misinterpret our own practice according to the norms of utilitarian rationality that makes Frazer's hypotheses appear "plausible to people who think as he does," namely the custom to interpret behaviour as "rational" in the sense of means-end-relationships: as calculated efforts directed at achieving a certain result. Wittgenstein rejects this conception of action not only because it seems to miss the point of *ritual* practice in contrast to, say, the calculated efforts of individuals to achieve certain goods of individual life which are not prescribed or offered by tradition. Wittgenstein's objection is of a more general kind and concerns a kind of *moral* or *existential* inversion: he regards Frazer's explanations as based on a totally wrong conception of the relation between theory and practice which may be applicable to certain profane activities and beliefs but not to the sphere of religion. The interpretation of action as the rational employment of means for obtaining a certain end presupposes a knowledge about natural relations of which the action, then, is the consequence.

[12] RF 63; emphasis M.-S. L.

[13] Cf. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory", in: J. Clifford/G.E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley 1986, 99. As to a more detailed account of these recent developments within cultural anthropology, see Maria-Sybille Lotter, "Fremderfahrung und Selbsterfahrung in der Ethnologie", in: M. Hampe/M.-S. Lotter (eds.), *Erfahrungsformen in den Wissenschaften* (forthcoming).

But this, according to Wittgenstein, misses the point of magical practices which
he interprets not as a kind of pseudo-science but as a kind of religion:

> When [... Frazer] explains to us that the king must be killed in his prime, because
> the savages believe that otherwise his soul would not be kept fresh, all one can say
> is: Where that practice and these views occur together, the practice *does not
> spring from the view, but they are both just there.* (RF 62)

And Wittgenstein adds with regard to religious practices:

> It can indeed happen [...] that a person will give up a practice after he has recog-
> nized an error on which it was based. [...] But this is not the case with the religious
> practices of a people and *therefore* there is *no* question of an error. (RF 62)

Now the point of religious practices, for Wittgenstein, is not that they serve cer-
tain ends but that they *express* something "deep" about our lives which is not an
information about a possible end to be obtained by certain means: they rather
show *how* men can *be* and *what men can do to each other*. For this reason, he
suggests, we do not need to know everything about the theoretical context of a
practice in order to see what it means. As he makes clear in his discussion of the
Beltane festival, it is not primarily the meaning of a custom for the participants he
is interested to know but the deep side of human existence it reveals *for us*. In
this respect Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer is motivated by his view of cultural
anthropology as an institution *of moral edification and self-clarification.*[14] For it
appears that Wittgenstein looks upon cultural anthropology in much the same way
as he looks upon philosophy of which he says in *Culture and Value* (1931):

> Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more
> a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's own way of seeing
> things. (And what one expects of them.)[15]

> I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking
> with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right.[16]

Thus cultural anthropology, one may add, can serve as a amplifying mirror of the
deep side of human existence because it presents in an unfamiliar context what in
our culture is concealed by the familiarity of customs and rationalizations. For the
sinister and dreadful reveals itself rather seldom within one's own culture even

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[14]   In the following exposition I will restrict myself to the notions Wittgenstein had developed
       so far (1931) in order to avoid confusions between terminologies belonging to different
       stages of his thought.

[15]   L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1980, 16.

[16]   L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 18.

though it is kept alive by ritual manifestations. A Catholic does not vividly
imagine the suffering of Christ every time he crosses himself.

At the same time, however, Wittgenstein makes a very strong claim about *our
own feelings* as indicators of the *nature* and *existence* of magical and religious
phenomena as such. He does not only say that our *motives* for doing anthropo-
logical research spring from our own lives and that a prevalent motive is the de-
sire to experience strong and powerful expressions of life. Over and above that,
he insists that the meaning of *why* in the question "Why does such a cult exist"
should be regarded the same as the meaning of why in the question "why does
this cult strike ourselves as terrible?":

> That is, the same thing that accounts for the fact that this incident strikes us as
> dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic, etc., as anything but trivial and insignificant,
> is that which has called this incident to life. (RF 63)

Thus Wittgenstein's view of cultural anthropology as a moral science serving at
self-clarification is intrinsically connected with assumptions about the nature and
the cognition of moral reality within cultural anthropology as a science of other
ways of life. In the latter respect, he proposes methodological revisions: Why-
questions in cultural anthropology, according to Wittgenstein, cannot be an-
swered neither by causal historical explanations of the development of mores nor
by rationalizations of the behaviour of individuals which contain assumptions
about means-end-relationships. Moreover, according to Wittgenstein such
questions may not be answered by "mere hypotheses" but only by a method
which offers an immediate and complete grasp of the matter: the synoptic method
of *perspicuous representation* (Übersicht) which he derives from Goethe,[17] an
ordering of the materials at hand which, if successful, is supposed to make their
meaning *evident*. In what follows I will examine how this method is to be under-
stood if it is to make sense in cultural anthropology, and in what respects causal-
historical explanations, even though Wittgenstein apparently wants to get rid of
them, are indispensable for his own conception of cultural anthropology both as
an art of moral edification and clarification and as a science of other ways of life.

The point of our interest in alien cultures and its methodological impact

Wittgenstein's criticism of the causal-historical explanation is not meant to show
that this method is *in every respect* useless for the understanding of alien prac-

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[17]   For a comprehensive account of this Goethian method in Wittgenstein see J. Schulte,
       "Chor und Gesetz. Zur morphologischen Methode bei Goethe und Wittgenstein", in:
       Grazer Philosophische Studien 21, 1984, 1-32.

tices. He claims, however, that it is not the only method but "only *one* way of assembling the data" (RF 69); and, moreover, he insists that it is not the way to satisfy the need that originally generated our urge to learn about strange and dreadful customs. Wittgenstein explains this shortcoming by the *hypothetical* character of causal historical explanations:

> Compared with the impression which the description makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain.
> Every explanation is an hypothesis. (RF 63)

From the perspective of an empirical science like Malinowskian ethnology this criticism sounds rather strange, for it seems to imply that cultural research should aim at certain knowledge. In what follows, however, Wittgenstein makes it clear that he is far from mistaking cultural anthropology for a Cartesian kind of Science. According to Wittgenstein, it is not a theoretical, Cartesian interest we take in cultural anthropology but an urge for knowledge of a totally different kind which is rather comparable to the condition of somebody in love:

> But an hypothetical explanation will be of little help to someone, say, who is upset because of love. – It will not calm him. (RF 63)

As Frank Cioffi has pointed out, these remarks can be understood as criticizing a misuse of the language of information and explanation.[18] In this respect Wittgenstein's polemics echo Kierkegaard's criticism of the historical method of biblical studies, especially his exclusive opposition between the merely "hypothetical" and "approximative" truth of historical knowledge on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the decisiveness of religious belief unshaken by theoretical doubt. Over and above that, however, Wittgenstein points to a rather fundamental aspect of the nature of anthropological knowledge which is quite different from the attitude of the pious. To sum up, Wittgenstein says that when we reach a really satisfying understanding of a foreign cult or religious practice what we have grasped is not its historical origin but its "inner nature" (RF 75); and this means *a possibility of mankind in general* and, therefore, also a *possibility for ourselves*. We can grasp this possibility because, according to Wittgenstein, it is somehow "connected" with the reality perceived. Wittgenstein points to the example of the Beltane festival where a cake is distributed in order to select a "victim" whom the others then pretend to fling into the fire. While Frazer explains this custom by the hypothesis of a bygone past when the victim was really burned, Wittgenstein points out that it is not the hypothetical knowledge of a past fact but our realization of a *human possibility connected with the present form* of the cult which makes us feel that the practice expresses something sinister:

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[18]   F. Cioffi, *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*, Cambridge University Press 1998, 19.

> The question is: does the sinister, as we may call it, attach to the practice of the Beltane Fire festival in itself, as it was carried on one hundred of years ago, or is the festival sinister only if the hypothesis of its origin turns out to be true? I believe it is clearly the inner nature of the modern practice itself which seems sinister to us [... W]hat gives this practice depth is the *connection* with the burning of a man. (RF 75)

Now against the background of present-day discussions about our cognitive and moral attitudes with regard to foreign cultures this claim appears rather doubtful. *First*, cultural anthropologist of today cultivate a strong *methodological* distrust against those rather rash inferences from one's own feelings to the nature and feelings of people in other cultures as Wittgenstein presents us with plenty of examples. In contrast to both Frazer and Wittgenstein, they do not anymore regard themselves entitled to infer from their own mental associations to the "inner nature" of the practices in cultures where people may think and feel quite different. And even at the time Wittgenstein studied Frazer the method of introspective speculation was not understood anymore as a useful method of research; Malinowski's paradigm of "participant observation" had already taken the place of the purely speculative research in the study or library.[19] The *second* methodological objection concerns the search for a "deep" sense in foreign practices which is supposed to be immediately present to the participants. For do we not have to admit that everywhere can be found practices which are not meaningful anymore to their participants and whose meaning can only be reconstructed by historical research? Was Frazer's interest in Nemi, for example, not aroused precisely by the insight "that it was apparently not expressive of the life of its community but a barbarous anomaly, human sacrifice having been long discarded?"[20] Does it not appear that Wittgenstein's vision of "connections" is, on the whole, nothing else but an invitation to project our own wishes and feelings into the ethnographic data? And *thirdly*, present-day discussions about "cultural imperialism" and "ethnocentrism" in the cultural sciences suggest an *ethical* objection against Wittgenstein's view. For if we realize that people in other cultures feel and think differently from us; how are we then entitled to judge their practices as "sinister"? Are these not moral valuations we are only entitled to make within our own culture? Should we not refrain from any moral evaluation of practices in cultures different from our own?

These objections, indeed, cannot easily be discarded and shall be dealt with. Still, I think that Wittgenstein touches the central point of understanding in cultural

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[19]   Malinowski published his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* which also contained an outline of his research programm, at the same time Frazer published his *Golden Bough* (1922), and it soon became rather popular.

[20]   Cioffi 1998, 260.

anthropology in contrast, say, to a biological understanding of the behaviour of apes. For if intercultural understanding is possible at all, we must in principle be capable of grasping the point of an other culture's practices even though "it is not ours". And to understand the rationale of other persons' behaviour is nothing else but to understand it *as a possibility of myself as a human being.* In other words: We have to presuppose the universality of the human mind in a certain sense. Now, everything depends on determining exactly *in what sense* we presuppose universality in the cultural sciences, and in what sense we do not – and cannot – grasp "human universals".

In what follows I want to defend the view (which I suppose to be a rather common, if not trivial assumption among cultural anthropologists of today) that to account for the universal aspect of cultural anthropology we need neither presuppose the existence of cultural universals, nor assume that our understanding of the point of religious rites is *a priori.* With regard to our feelings about the "deep" aspects of cultural life Wittgenstein talks about, the psychoanalyst and ethnologist Georges Devereux[21] has presented many examples which demonstrate that, depending on the similarities and differences between the culture described and the culture of the observer, intuitive understanding can be more or less spontaneous and satisfactory. According to Devereux, when he visited the Mohave, a tribe of plain-Indians, he discovered such an affinity to his own ways of feeling and expression that, from the beginning, he was able to meet the Mohave's sense of humour and even to interpret their dreams, while with the Sedang Moi in Indonesia he had to learn every single social rule explicitly in order to reduce his fatal tendency to false conclusions and social misbehaviour. While in the former case he learned to trust his intuitive understanding, in the latter case he had to discard it. The same, of course, is true with regard to inferential knowledge: it depends both on our information of the background and symbolic context of rites and on the special contrast between "our" culture and the culture we want to know about.

Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer's incapacity to find immediate connections of the unknown with the familiar seems to indicate, however, that he does not fully realize that the "deepness" we feel in a practice recorded may only depend on a certain *account* of it, a certain description which may be much more representative of *our own culture* than of the practice itself. This, of course, is the more probable if we have not had much experience with other ways of thinking and feeling. Even an experienced empirical ethnographer, however, who in the course of his or her studies has underwent several distinct socializations and developed an unusual flexibility of emotional response could not take his or her own emo-

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[21]   G. Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, Paris 1967.

tional reactions to a rite as a neutral indicator of its meaning. In the course of ethnographic field-research the "deep" emotions the anthropologist experiences when confronted with strange customs can neither be taken as indicators of a kind of feeling or valuation shared by both anthropologist and locals, nor do they immediately represent a general human possibility. Rather, feelings like anger, or valuations like "sinister" are to be regarded as *information about the foreign culture in contrast*[22] *to one's own personality and the familiar culture.* And as such they are not the results but the initial data of a process of discovering differences and similarities in the patterns of feeling and thinking between the foreign and the familiar culture.

Perspicuous representation in cultural anthropology

It is not all too clear how Wittgenstein, in his remarks on Frazer, interprets the conditions of transcultural understanding. He seems to be undecided as to two conceptions which are rather exclusive of one another. For on the one hand he seems to interpret the anthropological experience of the dreadful as the cognition of a universal possibility of mankind in general which can be realized by a pure speculation independent of any particular context, while on the other hand he seems to consider historical knowledge as a necessary condition of the understanding. The first view is most firmly represented in his remarks on the possibility of *inventing the object of anthropological research*:

> One sees how misleading Frazer's explanations are – I believe – by noting that one could very easily invent primitive practices oneself, and it would be pure luck if they were not actually found somewhere. That is, the principle according to which these practices are arranged (geordnet) 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. (RF 65 f.)

> All these *different* practices show that it is not a question of the derivation of one from the other, but of a common spirit. And one could invent (devise) all these ceremonies oneself. And precisely that spirit from which one invented them would be their common spirit. (RF 80)

Also when Wittgenstein talks about a "secret law" behind religious phenomena he may easily give the reader the idea of treating religious phenomena as the outcome of a kind of universal religious essence:

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[22]   With regard to the importance of cultural contrasts for ethnographic perception and conceptualization see Geertz 1977, 481.

'And so the chorus point 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 [...] (RF 69)

This "secret law" of the "common spirit" is also represented by the *method of perspicuous representation* which Wittgenstein seems to consider as an alternative method to the historical-causal explanation in the cultural sciences; a method which, unlike the latter, is supposed to meet the point of our interest in the magical and religious practices of alien people. Analogous to Goethe's biological methodology of determining "the original plant" (Die Urpflanze) and the "type" (Typus), the procedure Wittgenstein presents consists in ordering the phenomena in a consequent line so that "we see the connections":

> 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 our eye for a formal connection. (RF 69)

These remarks could be understood in the sense that Wittgenstein regards cultural phenomena as static forms ordered according to similarity or to genetic descendence analogous to geometrical forms or to the different skeletons of animals Goethe had examined.

Now all these reflections sound as if Wittgenstein regards the empirical investigation of the historical development and the social context of rites as a mere adjunct to a purely rational speculation about a priori possibilities of human existence and their ordering. This impression is enhanced by remarks like the following which give the impression that Wittgenstein ignores the difficulty involved in applying general terms like "religious" to concrete phenomena in other cultural contexts:

> The religious actions, or the religious life, of the priest-king are no *different in kind* from any *genuinely religious* action of today, for example, a confession of sins. (RF 64; emphasis M.-S L.)

As Frank Cioffi has pointed out, such a description of practices as religious practices begs the question of the applicability of universal concepts.

> What makes the argument fallacious, is that the practice [...] is not ours and so we do not know what rationale is [... H]ow do we know, a priori, that the Nemi rite is a genuinely religious action?[23]

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[23] Cioffi 1998, 256.

At the same time, however, Wittgenstein seems to be aware that our understanding of other cultures depends on particular information about historical contexts without which we could not know what general categories are applicable to the particular case. Thus he points out that the impression we derive from the description of practices like the Beltane festival is directly dependent on our information about the past and present context of the rite:

> If it were the custom at some festival for the men to ride on one another (as in the game of horse and rider), we would see nothing in this but a form of carrying which reminds us of men riding horseback; – but if we knew that among many peoples it had been the custom, say, to employ slaves as riding animals and, so mounted, to celebrate certain festivals, we would now see something deeper and less harmless in the harmless practice of our time. (RF 75)

Here Wittgenstein seems to be aware that the method of perspicuous representation, if it is applicable to cultural anthropology at all, cannot be taken as revealing the "inner nature" of the practices themselves, as it might be thought if one concentrates on the Goethian origins of the method. His examples rather show how our vision of the moral content of practices depends on our *information* about the practices and meanings which constitute the *cultural context*; and these remarks demonstrate a much more sophisticated view of our situation as cultural anthropologists than the Goethian method of synopsis in its literal formulation seems to allow.

According to this view which I here tentatively attribute to Wittgenstein, the moral understanding of foreign practices does not consist in an immediate understanding of any description whatever by connecting it with the already familiar. But neither does it consist in a purely "neutral" and unbiased interpretation of foreign customs according to the account which is given by the participants themselves, as cultural relativists demand. Rather, field-research is to be looked upon as a constant searching for "connections" of the unfamiliar with the familiar, a process of discovering and discarding connections in the course of which a common ground for moral interaction between the research subjects and the cultural anthropologist is established.

Now the assumption of the possibility of a common moral ground for interaction between the representatives of different cultures reminds us of the fundamental objection of the cultural relativist that we have no right to estimate a foreign practice as "sinister", for the moral value attributed to practices differs from culture to culture. Cultural relativists refer to many examples that are supposed to show the utter cultural relativity of moral judgement and feeling. While in one culture the old people are held in high regard, for example, in others tradition demands or allows that they are killed by their own children. These classical examples, however, do not show much about cultural differences as long as their

moral context and the moral attitude of the participants are not taken into consideration. They presuppose that "killing" can be treated as an universal, meaning the same in different contexts. However, as the psychologist Karl Duncker has pointed out, an action like "killing" is more than the observable activity but depends on the pattern of meanings attributed to it by the participants in a certain situation.[24] And with regard to our example of the killing of aged parents the meaning of this action differs widely:

> 'Killing an aged parent' may, according to circumstances, mean sparing him the miseries of a lingering death or an existence which, as a born warrior, he must feel as exceedingly dull and unworthy; or it may mean protecting him against injuries from enemies or beasts, or causing him to enter the happy land [...] But even where it is not performed out of benevolence it may still be in full accordance with the victim's feelings.[25]

To learn about the concrete situational meaning of a practice, then, is *to find connections with the familiar*, for example with our view of what makes life worth living, with the view that death is better than an unworthy life, etc. Even though a Christian anthropologist, for example, may not be ready to take over such a practice as her own possibility for life, because, for example, Christian traditions forbid the destruction of human life even when it involves the most painful suffering, she may be able to recognize it as a genuine moral possibility of herself as a human being. And as such it represents a common ground between her and the representatives of other cultures, even though this common ground is neither timeless nor independent of her cultural knowledge, nor does it imply that she shares the same feelings and evaluations.

The indispensability of causal knowledge in anthropology for the perspicuous representation of the moral qualities of life

The previous results may serve to clarify the value of the method of historical analysis for a Wittgensteinian approach to cultural anthropology which is somehow obscured by Wittgenstein's own polemical remarks. For as Wittgenstein's discussion of Frazer's examples shows, the applicability of his own method of synopsis depends on historical information about the context of the rites. Still, even from the standpoint of empirical cultural anthropology Wittgenstein does not appear totally wrong in his criticism of the inutility of Frazer's account with regard to the interest we take in "dreadful" practices. For it is precisely the information about the *practical and symbolical context* of rites as the Beltane-festival,

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24   See K. Duncker, "Ethical Relativity? (An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics)", *Mind* XLVIII, 1939, 39-57.

25   K. Duncker 1939, 42.

that is lacking in Frazer because he relied on the fragmentary information to be gained from second-hand-sources. To sum up, it is not true that Wittgenstein regards the search for historical information merely as a misunderstanding of the point of one's own interest in another culture. This, however, for Wittgenstein is the case with Frazer, for his speculative method of producing hypotheses about origins – in contrast, say, to a Malinowskian study of real life context – does not enable us to realize our own "connections" with the practices discussed but only serves to disguise them.

In his remarks on Spengler (1931) Wittgenstein makes quite plain that he does not regard cultural understanding as the subordination of specific phenomena under preconceived general concepts nor as a modelling of general laws but rather as a process of discovering of what he calls *family similarities* between different epochs and phenomena:

> Spengler could be much better understood if he said: I am comparing different cultural epochs with the lives of families; within a family there is a family resemblance, though you will also find a resemblance between members of different families; family resemblance differs from the other sort of resemblance in such and such ways, etc. What I mean is: we have to be told the object of comparison, the object from which this way of viewing things is derived, otherwise the discussion will constantly be affected by distortions. Because willy-nilly we shall ascribe the properties of the prototype to the object we are viewing in its light; and we claim "it *must always* be ..."[26]

Anthropological comparisons of cultures as to their "family similarities" as well as their differences, indeed, may shed some light on Wittgenstein's above-quoted thesis that

> the same thing that accounts for the fact that this incident strikes us as dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic, etc., as anything but trivial and insignificant, is that which has called this incident to life. (RF 63)

Still, in order to grasp the "dreadful" aspect of a practice, the anthropologist has to stress the differences no less than the similarities of the cultures concerned. For

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26   These remarks are followed by a discussion of the role of the prototype: "This is because we want to give the prototype's characteristics a purchase on our way of representing things. But since we confuse prototype and object we find ourselves dogmatically conferring on the object properties which only the prototype necessarily possesses. [...] But the prototype should be clearly presented for what it is; so that it characterizes the whole discussion and determines its form. This makes it the focal point, so that its general validity will depend on the fact that it determines the form of discussion rather than on the claim that everything which is true only of it will depend on the fact that it determines the form of discussion rather than on the claim that everything which is true only of it holds too for all the things that are being discussed." (L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 14e)

information about the comparative social differences between cultures can be a necessary condition for the recognition of those emotional "connections" within a culture which enable us to understand a practice by "connecting" several of its aspects with familiar experiences of our own respective culture. This can be illustrated by the way in which the ethnologist S. F. Nadel has employed the classical inductive method of *concomitant variation* in his comparative studies of witchcraft in several African societies.[27]

Nadel draws attention to the fact that within Mesakin society, the mother-brother is very often accused of (and persecuted for) using witchcraft against his sisters-son with whom he is usually on very hostile terms. Now if we lacked any further information, it would be rather difficult for, say, a member of middle-European culture, to discover any "connections" to experiences of her own, since such a hostility does not exist as a rule between uncle and nephew in her society. Only when she is told that in this society the nephew is the legal inheritor of his mothers brother, and that tradition demands that he should obtain an "anticipated inheritance" from his uncle already at puberty, which the uncle never voluntarily presents him with, she might discover some connections with feelings she is familiar with; not the typical feelings between uncle and nephew but between those who have to bequeath something and those who have to expect their death in order to inherit. But yet, as Nadel points out, this does not fully account for the hostility, for the relation of inheritance does *not everywhere* breed primarily hostile feelings. Thus, in the neighboring society of the Korongo which appears in most aspects similar to the Mesakin, uncle and nephew are on much better terms and no such witchcraft accusations occur at all. Only when one looks closely at the differences between the two otherwise very similar cultures, one can isolate the traits that might be possible causes for the different practices in question. By this method, Nadel finally draws attention to the two connected facts: First, in Mesakin society, strength and virility that shows in heavy wrestling and spear-fighting is regarded as the highest value of a male life, with the consequence of devaluating ageing. Secondly, these sports – and thereby the potentiality to display full manliness – are restricted to the age-groups under 25, everybody afterwards being counted among the "old men." Thus, the uncle is in this most important respect regarded inferior to his nephew even when he, in fact, might still be physically stronger, and the nephew's demand for his "anticipated heritage" must remind him that he is now counted as an "old man" who soon is to die. That such circumstances are rather suited to breed resentment, and that in the case of the young man becoming ill, suspicion easily falls on the uncle because every-

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[27]   S.F. Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An Essay in Comparison", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 54, 1952, 18-29.

body supposes him to have a strong motive,[28] can now be understood by the European anthropologist by finding connections to emotionally similar relations in her own culture although social classifications are quite different over there. Thus, as Nadel himself points out, the witchcraft beliefs as objects of cultural anthropology are "*causally as well as conspicuously* related to specific anxieties and stresses in social life" which we are in principle capable of understanding – although, of course, we may err – by connecting them to the familiar. In this respect, Nadel shares Wittgenstein's conviction, that the cause of a phenomenon and the reasons for our understanding it ultimately go together in cultural anthropology:

> The word 'conspicuously' is relevant because the witchcraft beliefs also indicate the precise nature of the social causes of which they are the symptoms.[29]

Still, such a convergence of the causes for the maintenance of traditions and attitudes and the reasons for understanding them is only possible where the practice in question belongs to those customs of a society which have not only recently developed but are kept going by reason of their connectedness to other rather static aspects of the culture in question. There is no reason, however, to attribute such a static character to practices in general. In societies which undergo a process of normative change and development, such an explanation would hardly be sufficient. In such cases causal-historical explanations of practices are quite indispensable for checking the correctness of anthropological accounts of the moral aspects of rites. The Wittgensteinian approach, however, rather leads to underestimating their significance. For Wittgenstein's limited view of cultural anthropology as a moral science has the consequence that he unduly neglects the "exterior" forces and restrictions of natural environment as well as political and social events as causes for the development of rites which, in some rather extreme cases of social destabilization, even account for the most outstanding traits of a rite. In this respect he repeats a prejudice which goes back to the philosophy of German idealism: the view that rites can only be understood as expressions of the *spirit* of a people, a *Volksgeist* as Herder called it.

As a matter of fact, this view has been widely held among the cultural anthropologists themselves, especially those of the school of Franz Boas, and has generated lots of monographs and comparative studies of cultures. One of the most famous, which here may serve to illustrate the delusions which can be bred

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[28]   On the other hand, since the Mesakin apparently do not attribute a similarly strong motive for hate to the nephew, they did not know about a single case of witchcraft used by the nephew against the uncle, although, theoretically, they regarded this just as possible as the other way around. See Nadel 1952, 27.

[29]   S.F. Nadel, „Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An Essay in Comparison", 28.

by such a one-sided view of practices and emotions as expressions of a human spirit, concerns the interpretation of *potlatch*, the famous practice of the Kwakiutl (at the west-coast of northern America) to spend all their goods, even those necessary for survival, on gifts and excessive fiestas of extravagant waste and destruction. The most famous interpretation of this cult goes back to Ruth Benedict's book *Patterns of Culture*,[30] supposedly the most popular book of cultural anthropology till today, which contains a psychological portrait of three cultures she supposes to be expressive of rather different traits of personality representing the extremes of the spectrum of moral emotions: thus the Zuni are described as mild, apollonian people, the Dobuans as paranoid and the Kwakiutl as megalomaniac dionysians cultivating aggressive and destructive tendencies. Overwhelmed by the fascinating account of the Kwakiutl, the French philosopher George Bataille developed a metaphysical "theory of economy" based on the idea that everything in nature at bottom aims at waste and destruction;[31] and the idea became so popular that during the 1970's there was hardly a student of the cultural sciences in Europe who was not familiar with the idea of potlatch as the expression of a fundamental tendency to waste and destruction. However this may be, already in the 1950's and 60's research on the historical development of the north-western tribes had shown that the extreme forms of waste Benedict had attributed to the special cultivation of dionysic personality-traits by the Kwakiutl have not been typical for these tribes before they were nearly eliminated by the European immigrants during the nineteenth century. On the contrary, it appears that only at a time when the Kwakiutl were reduced to very small numbers, living as factory workers at the coast where they had access to plenty of European goods and where, at the same time, they were prohibited their traditional warfare, they developed their extreme patterns of competitive potlatching.[32] Thus in such a case the meaning of "why" implied in the question, "Why does such a cult exist" cannot be regarded the same as the meaning of why in the question "why does this cult strike ourselves as terrible?"; it includes causes which are *external* to the habits and symbols of the Kwakiutl at a certain time. Ethnology provides us also with many examples of religious movements like the tribal Ghost Dance Movement in the Western USA around the end of the nineteenth century that, unlike the potlatch, are not only transformed by outward causes but would not have come into existence at all under different external conditions.

Of course, Wittgenstein might insist that, never mind what the historical causes for the development of a cult were, such an extreme practice must have a "deep" meaning for the participants, i.e. it must express some very basic need and feeling of their life. Yet one has to realize that in foreign cultures – as well in one's own – one encounters such needs and feelings not as timeless possibilities of human existence in general but as realities which are only developed under certain historical conditions and, in their specific form, would not exist without them. For this reason, understanding the "inside" cannot be wholly "from inside" but, on the contrary, needs to be complemented by a perspective "from outside".

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[30] See R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, New York: Houghton Mifflin 1934.

[31] Cf. Georges Bataille, Das theoretische Werk, München 1975, particularly 93-111.

[32] For a comprehensive account of this development see Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, New York 1968, 308-314, which contains a bibliography of the relevant studies.