Introduction

The question which runs throughout these essays is: when is it a mistake to take our interest in a phenomenon in the direction of an enquiry into its causes and conditions rather than towards an enhanced grasp of the impression it produces, or the ruminations it incites? How pervasive is the tendency to proceed as if a phenomenon called for empirical enquiry when what is really wanted with respect to it is clarity as to the sources of our preoccupation and, where appropriate, untroubled contemplation of it? Wittgenstein thought that Frazer’s accounts of human sacrifice and other ritual practices, and Freud’s dealings with dreams, jokes and mental life in general, provided examples of this error. How are such criticisms to be assessed?

There are complexities and ambiguities in Wittgenstein’s denial of the appropriateness of empirical enquiry that arise whatever substantive topic he is dealing with, whether psychoanalytic, aesthetic or anthropological. These complexities and ambiguities emerge clearly in his objections to Frazer’s manner of dealing with the enigmatic method of choosing the successor to the priest of the temple of Diana at Nemi in classical times by mortal combat with a runaway slave seeking asylum.

One class of grounds for declaring empirical considerations irrelevant is conceptual. The questions, explicitly posed, make an answer which depends on further information logically anomalous. In his remarks on Frazer’s account of the ritual of succession at Nemi Wittgenstein says, ‘The very idea of wanting to explain . . . the killing of the priest-king seems wrong . . .’, and that one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we know without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself.¹

This remark combines both of Wittgenstein's conceptual objections to Frazer's dealings with ritual practices – that the phenomena dealt with are beyond empirical explanation and that understanding them does not require it. Both these grounds fail. But Wittgenstein has additional non-conceptual grounds for denying the pertinence of empirical enquiry. These are that whatever relevance empirical method may have to the question of the nature and origin of ritual practices this is not the central question which Frazer raises and is not, in any case, the question which arises for us when we contemplate human sacrifice and the ritual life of mankind.

An example of a conceptual unexplainability thesis – what I call a ‘limits’ thesis in ‘Wittgenstein and obscurantism’ – is to be found in Wittgenstein’s discussions with Schlick and Waismann on the explanation of aesthetic value where Wittgenstein says ‘whatever I was told I would reject . . . not because the explanation was false but because it was an explanation’. This is a familiar view in contexts where value is under discussion. What is odd is to find it expressed where the question is ostensibly empirical: whether particular, like ‘Why must the priest at the temple of Diana be slain?’ or general like ‘Why did people engage in human sacrifice?’

Frazer asks of the ritual of succession at Nemi, in which the incumbent priest is replaced by a runaway slave who has killed him in combat, what this unique method of recruitment to the priesthood means and how it came into being. It is difficult to see how Frazer’s answer to this question, which is that the rite represents a survival from a time when the belief was held that the replacement of the aging priest by a more vigorous successor, as evidenced by his victory in combat, would enhance the agricultural welfare of the community, is conceptually inappropriate as we are told by Johnston, Hacker, Rhee, Bell and others that it is. But these commentators also follow Wittgenstein in producing additional and epistemically distinct grounds for thinking Frazer mistaken in advancing empirical explanations of human sacrifice (as of ritual generally): he is failing to rise to the occasion.

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Similar considerations arise in connection with Wittgenstein’s objections to psychoanalytic explanation. The objection that Freud confounds causes with reasons or, as Wittgenstein also, more specifically, puts it, hypotheses with ‘further descriptions’, is entangled with the quite distinct objection that Freud advances explanations when the matters he deals with demand clarification, that is, they call for an elucidation of the relation in which we stand to the phenomena rather than an explanation of them. And the same ambiguity characterises Wittgenstein’s objections to causal explanation in aesthetics where he once again alternates between the objection that causal hypotheses are conceptually inappropriate responses to requests for the explanation of aesthetic experiences and that they are not what we really want.

This non-conceptual construal of Wittgenstein’s objections supplies a solution to G. E. Moore’s perplexity as to why remarks on Frazer, Freud and aesthetics should figure in the same lectures (‘mingled in a curious way’ as Moore puts it). The mistake shared by Frazer and Freud and those who conceive of aesthetic explanations as requiring empirical validation is not that of raising explicitly a-causal questions to which they confusedly and incongruously give causal answers but their failure to address the a-hypothetical, clarificatory, resolvable-by-reflection-and-apposite-description questions which, in Wittgenstein’s view, the occasion called for.

There are two distinct grounds for holding that a discourse, even though conceptually appropriate to the questions raised, mistakes what the context calls for. One is that it betrays signs of interests more central than that of the only information-resolvable question addressed, but which, nevertheless, make their presence felt. This is how it is put by Paul Redding. ‘(Frazer’s) response to his own questions in which he ignores its tone and responding merely to its syntactic form, offers an explanation, is, given what we can grasp about his needs from his tone, inappropriate.’ But Redding also expressed another, distinct, non-conceptual thesis, one which does not depend on any individual peculiarities of Frazer’s text, when he writes, ‘The response which Wittgenstein thinks appropriate . . .

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rather than constituting an act of discovery of something new' is more like 'the identification and acknowledgement of something known but misconstrued or denied' (ibid. p. 263). This transcends Frazer, so who is being referred to?

How is a claim of this kind – one as to the appropriateness of a response – to be assessed? P. Johnston appears to be advancing the same genre of claim when he writes, 'Frazer and Freud seek to offer explanations in contexts where Wittgenstein holds that what is required is not an explanation but that clarification embodied in the attainment of an Überblick' (i.e. a survey or synopsys of the already known) (Paul Johnston, 1989, p. 50). How is it to be determined that what a context requires is not explanation but 'Übersicht'? In what does inappropriateness consist? What makes the proffering of explanation in such contexts like handing a bereaved person a copy of the coroner's report, as Redding graphically puts it?

Though it is correct to maintain that the question why the Beltane Fire-festival or the Nemi rite affect us as they do is not to be resolved by discovering how they originated, there are no substantial textual grounds for holding that Frazer was subliminally preoccupied with this question. But this need not absolve Frazer from error. On this view the question Frazer does not raise nevertheless arises and it was remiss of him not to address it. And the problem this sets us is how a claim of this nature is to be dealt with. When a particular text gives us no grounds for the judgement that empirical aims have been erroneously pursued when what was called for was something else, where are these grounds to be sought? What kind of fact is it that empirical explanation has been erroneously pursued when the grounds proffered for the error are neither conceptual confusion nor that a division of purpose is manifested in a particular text?

Rush Rhees writes of the Beltane Fire-festival: 'What is important is . . . the evidence which makes its connection with an actual practice of human sacrifice overwhelmingly probable prior to any historical research and independently of anything the research may bring to light . . .' The question this raises is for whom are Rhees's judgements of relative importance coercive? Just after saying that 'even the attempt to seek an explanation (of the Nemi rite) is a mistake,' Wittgenstein remarks – 'For someone troubled

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by love an explanation will not help much. It will not bring peace.'

In ‘When do problems and methods bypass one another by?’ I quote an instance of someone ‘troubled by love’ who appears to ask the very kind of question Wittgenstein holds impertinent to the occasion – Chaucer’s Medea, abandoned by Jason, and plaintively asking – ‘Why liked me thy yellow hair to see / more than the boundes of mine honesty’? I held this to illustrate Wittgenstein’s view of how the form of a question may mislead us as to its character since Medea’s question is not to be taken as the manifestation of the kind of straightforward epistemic demand, which psychoanalysis and socio-biology both claim to address. Though, of course, questions of this form may often be manifestations of just such a demand there are occasions when, as Wittgenstein says, what is really wanted is not an hypothesis. The problem this sets is, ‘When?’ How do we identify such occasions?

EXPLANATION VERSUS CLARIFICATION

This arraignment of the relevance of empirical enquiry on the grounds that its success will not meet our needs is not peculiar to Wittgenstein. In a commentary on Proust I find the following remark: ‘(Those) who occupy themselves with outer social activities – the Dreyfus case, the World War – are attempting to escape the primary obligation to interpret the inner significance of their own impressions.’ Proust himself, in the preface to his translation of Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies, writes: ‘What happiness for a mind tired of seeking the truth within itself to tell itself that it is located outside . . . and that in order to reach it one has to go to some trouble; this trouble will be entirely material and will, for one’s mind, be a relaxation.’

The striking thing about Wittgenstein’s remarks on Frazer is not just how often, in commenting on what is ostensibly an hermeneutic enterprise, Wittgenstein turns away from interpreting the phenomena to relating them ‘to our own feelings and thoughts’ but that these much outnumber his straightforwardly interpretative efforts. Wittgenstein has more to say about how we feel

about Nemi, Beltane, *et al.* than how their practitioners felt about them. He tells us that Frazer was wrong to imply that what impresses us about the Beltane festival, in which a pretence is made of burning a man, is its roots in the practice of human sacrifice rather than its relation to ‘our own feelings and thoughts’. He sometimes explicitly urges the priority of this concern with self-clarification. He says, for example, of the practice of treating an illness as if it could be washed away like dirt and is apparently based on ‘childish’ theories, ‘The correct and interesting thing to say is not that it has come from (the childish theories) but rather that it could have come from them.’ In other words, a survey of our relation to ritual practices—which of them we can make sense of and how and which not and why—is what is called for by the phenomena Frazer records rather than the rationale and genesis of the practices themselves. That this judgement of Wittgenstein’s belongs to we/us/our discourse rather than to that of conceptual analysis proper also emerges from the commentaries. Rush Rhee writes: ‘Wittgenstein questions the dependence of our impression on the hypothesis and asks why *we* are moved to say they are deep and terrible and what it means to say this about them.’ (My italics.)

The philosopher/sociologist Georg Simmel attempted a characterisation of what I have referred to as ‘we/us/our’ discourse when he spoke of ‘a mental category . . . which is deep rooted and not easily described by traditional concepts . . . a third something in man beyond his individual subjectivity and the logical objective thinking which is universally convincing . . .’. In distinguishing his ‘third something’ from both ‘particular real individuality’ and ‘an objectivity beyond men and their lives . . .’, Simmel writes:

A feeling in us distinguishes, often with instinctive sureness, between those convictions and dispositions which we modestly recognize as purely personal and subjective and those which we believe to be shared by some—perhaps all—other men . . . it seems as if something universal spoke in us.¹⁰

These ‘convictions and dispositions’ that are not ‘purely personal’ but may, nevertheless, be shared by only some rather than all men are reminiscent of the phenomenon Husserl describes in his fifth Cartesian Meditation as an ‘experiential sense of thereness for

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everyone’ but then immediately qualifies parenthetically (‘that is, everyone belonging to the corresponding cultural community . . .’). That is, not ‘thereness’ for all others but only ‘thereness’ for relevant others. It is this kind of communitarian truth which Wittgenstein aspires to in most of his judgements as to the relative importance of clarificatory and explanatory interests but they fail to attain it unless the pertinent community is more narrowly circumscribed. How shall this be done?

When have problems ‘thereness’?

In his discussion of the natural, though misleading, associations which surround the phenomenon of fire Gaston Bachelard tells us that fire is among those objects whose contemplation ‘can release reveries whose development is as regular and inevitable as sense experience’. An example of the kind of sense experience which manifests the regularity in development which Bachelard claims for certain reveries is provided by Joyce in his account of the childhood of the hero of Portrait of the Artist. ‘When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold.’ Not many ruminations and reveries have a sequence as regular and inevitable as this. And certainly not many of those imputed by Wittgenstein to readers of Frazer have. But even when they do not this does not make utterances concerning such reveries and ruminations false or pointless. To determine the extent to which they are true we have to make explicit the unstated restrictions on the scope of the utterance.

Consider Wittgenstein’s remark about the ‘depth’ of the impression made by Frazer’s account of Nemi and Beltane. It is obviously figurative, so in what sense could it be true? This can be illuminated by a comparison with the less figurative use of the term ‘depth’ in some remarks on the aesthetics of painting, where we are told that the distance of the rear plane from the picture plane determines the depth of the picture and so if a picture is not flat it has either shallow space or deep space. This is then illustrated by a comparison between Matisse’s Odalisque and Tintoretto’s Christ at the Sea of Galilee.

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The rear plane of the Matisse is close to the picture plane, that of the Tintoretto is far back. Fra Angelico’s Madonna is deeper than the Matisse, Renoir’s Mme. Charpentier deeper than the Fra Angelico, and Cezanne’s Maison Maria is deeper than the Renoir. But the Tintoretto is deeper still.13

Consider how picture ‘depth’ differs from literal three-dimensional depth, e.g., the depth to which the parsley sank in the butter on a hot summer’s day, from which Sherlock Holmes was able to infer something or other. This belongs with Simmel’s ‘logically objective thinking which is universally convincing . . .’. Does Pepper’s concept of picture depth? I am not sure. But it does not belong with Simmel’s ‘individual subjectivity’ either. It belongs with his ‘third something’ which is neither ‘particular individuality’ nor ‘the logical objective thinking which is universally convincing’. And yet though I don’t know how general the perception of relative depth in Western painting is I do know that Matisse is shallower than Tintoretto. This means that I must be placing an implicit limitation of scope on judgements of picture depth.

A communitarian judgement can be straightforwardly false. A simple example is provided by the psychiatrist Anthony Clare who, writing one Christmas on the appeal of Santa Claus, imputed it to the fact that his love is unconditional. This is quite wrong. It is an integral part of our conception of Santa Claus that his love (or anyway his gift-giving) is not unconditional but is restricted to children who have been ‘good’. (The popular song captures this essential ingredient: ‘You better be good, you better not cry / You better not pout / I’m telling you why / Santa Claus is coming to town.’) Although there are many for whom the practices described by Frazer do not have depth there are nevertheless those whom Wittgenstein’s remarks will incite to an awareness that they were seeking from explanation a satisfaction it cannot give and that their interest in the phenomena described by Frazer and others had sources other than those they had explicitly acknowledged.

If we are not to treat Wittgenstein’s remarks as mere Flaschenpost – messages in a bottle – how shall we circumscribe the community of whom Wittgenstein’s remarks might be true? We can designate it with the aid of an analogy used in The Brown Book at a point at which Wittgenstein wants to evoke the ineffable char-

acter of a certain kind of aesthetic experience, and says that it seems to be saying something and 'it is as though I had to find out what it says'. The community for which Nemi and human sacrifice in general raise self-clarificatory rather than explanatory/hermeneutic issues are those to whom the phenomenon of human sacrifice seems to be saying something and imposed on them an obligation to discover what it was that it was saying, but they misrepresent the position if they give this perceived demand for self-clarification the same status as that of picture depth.

In his remarks on colour Wittgenstein writes: 'This much I know. A physical theory cannot solve the problems that motivated Goethe.' Can we equally say, 'An empirical theory cannot solve the problems that motivated Frazer'? We are told by several commentators that, though Frazer may have thought he was engaged in an explanatory enterprise, he inadvertently reveals that what he really sought was clarification via the attainment of a perspicuous view. Wittgenstein says of 'the conception of a perspicuous view (Übersicht)' that it makes possible that understanding which consists just in the fact that we 'see the connections'. I do not think that Frazer shows that under the guise of seeking and advancing explanation of the practices he discusses he was really concerned with the attainment of a perspicuous view. But the category of a perspicuous view is indispensable if we are to understand our reflective lives better.

Recent attempts to deal scientifically with social life provide several candidates for texts which appear to straddle obliviously the line between empirical explanation and that special mode of understanding which 'consists just in the fact that we see the connections'. In 'Information, contemplation and social life' (pp. 19–46) I treated Goffman's work on stigma – 'abominations of the body . . . blemishes of individual character . . . the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion . . . ' etc . . . , as an example of discourse whose scientific rationale is at odds with several features of his procedure and, in particular, his provision of synoptic views of our involvement in social life while ostensibly laying the foundations for a science of it. But this must be distinguished from the more general thesis that certain topics incite us to seek self-clarification

with respect to them whether any particular text manifests a striving after synopticality or not. An example may make this antithesis, between explanatory and synoptic, self-clarificatory interests, and the way in which the latter may obtrude themselves, clearer. At one point in *Stigma*, where Goffman discusses the ‘moral career’ of the pimp, he expresses regret that the ‘passing dodges’ of pimps have not been more fully documented. But the conflict of feeling provoked in men of a certain upbringing by what Goffman calls the ‘moral career’ of the pimp doesn’t find its natural consummation in a more fully documented account of the pimp’s ‘daily round’. Contrast Goffman’s discursive, sociological, dealings with the pimp with the impression conveyed by Frans Masereel’s woodcut, *The Pimp* (1922). Masereel’s pimp – a ‘Mac-the-Knife’ figure – stands at the centre of a swirl of women evincing varying manners and degrees of thraldom. As pertinent to the concerns of ethnmethodology as it might be to learn of the techniques mastery of which enables a pimp to run his girls and keep them all happy without coming to the attention of the police there is a competing interest with which we tend to confound it. Not only is Masreel’s ‘Pimp’ of more pertinence to some of us than Goffman’s object of ethnmethodological enquiry but if it wasn’t for the non-theoretical, personal, fantasy-driven interest expressed by Masereel’s pimp we would take little interest in Goffman’s. For this rival interest the fact that we think of the pimp as like the owner of a sweetshop is of central relevance, however infelicitous a real pimp might find the analogy (or a real sweetshop proprietor).

Another image whose interest transcends its historicity is that depicted by David in his painting of Count Belisarius, blind and soliciting alms from a soldier formerly under his command. The story of Count Belisarius, reduced to blindness and beggary, does not sacrifice its interest as an image of ‘fallen greatness and blighted fame’ because it is a legend; it just loses one kind of interest and gains another. 17

Neither in the case of the pimp, nor of Count Belisarius, nor of the priest at Nemi must the demand for articulation of the hinter-