

Religion, Meaning, and the Limits of Explanation: Wittgenstein on Frazer

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Abstract

This paper explores Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, advancing the working hypothesis that these reflections emerge at the intersection of three key ideas that Wittgenstein decisively resists. First, Wittgenstein challenges the assumption that language games can be analyzed independently of the “vital” or “cultural” practices in which they are embedded. Second, he rejects the positivist notion that the progress of natural science will eventually render religion obsolete. Third, and most pointedly, he disputes the idea of a “universal grammar” underlying religious practices – a supposed structure hidden beneath the surface diversity of religious expressions. Through his remarks, Wittgenstein not only offers a powerful critique of the search for hidden essences – emphasizing the irreducibly plural and context-dependent nature of religious language – but also lays the groundwork for the methodological orientation that will characterize his later philosophical investigations.

1. The cultural context of Frazer's work

At a certain point of history everyone was reading Frazer: Malinowski was “grappling with” him at the beginning of his anthropological upheaval; Freud was quoting him during his inquiries on the issue of *totemism*, while Borges published a compelling review in which he praised *The Golden Bough* as a work for the years to come; at the same time, H. P. Lovecraft created horror stories based on the depictions of Frazer's account of rites associated with death and fertility, and even T.S. Elliot recognized his “debt” to Frazer's description of magic in ancient civilizations. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that Frazer was the man of the moment; someone who was truly able to express the *Zeitgeist* of an entire era on the pages of his book. In his heyday, he was a stirring academician, who not only influenced academia as whole but who was also able to break away from its walls.

Published in the 1890s,¹ *The Golden Bough*, authored by Frazer himself, by then a very respected researcher based in Cambridge, became a quintessential mark of the period. According to Mary Beard (1992), the reasons for this success were due to three aspects: first, the book was one of the founding works of the new science of anthropology; secondly, its written style was the reminiscence of the literary canons associated with the triumphs of the Victorian empire; and thirdly, and even more importantly, it was one of the most comprehensive accounts regarding the “myth of the Other” in a European society that was discovering, little by little, the enormous differences concerning the complexity of human cultural manifestations around the globe.

In addition to that, the book was also completely impregnated with the scientificist *philosophical aura* of its time. In his book,² which covers an impressive range of issues, Frazer looks at a variety of myths – which were collected from distinct forms of cultures (both geographically and chronologically speaking) – in order to find patterns that might have allowed him to comprehend different phenomena associated with a specific type of rite that lies at the center of his composition: the murder of the priest of Nemi. By inquiring into what happens on the myth of the high-priest of Nemi, Frazer advances the outline of a universal *grammar* of religious practices within an evolutionary framework that takes humanity from a superstitious stage – in which there is special attention to the rituals of Easter (the arrival of spring season), when the high-priest king of a group of ritualists must be killed and replaced by a younger individual so that the rites of fertility may be adequately continued – to a strictly scientific view of the world. In a nutshell, something alike the myth of the high-priest of Nemi could account for whole religious practices across the globe and it would have been “sublimated” by the most different cultures; a tale of this sort would encapsulate the starting point for the flourishing of every different religion on the planet.

But the point is that Frazer’s analysis hid that “scientific confidence” that was necessarily tied to the conviction of his era’s technical progress; in this sense, he was also a staunch proponent of the notion of cultural evolution, carrying in his ideas the belief that mankind advances through different stages

¹ As a matter of fact, the first volume of *The Golden Bough* had already been printed around 1890. But the “official version,” with all the volumes together, would first come to light around 1913–1915. In this regard Rothhaupt 2016 provides a detailed summary concerning the publication of Frazer’s main work.

² Frazer’s *Golden Bough* has had many editions – the last one amounted to twelve volumes (more than three thousand pages altogether).

– first starting from a magical infancy background, surrounded by a superstitious state of grace (and fear) in which Gods and men are living side-by-side; then achieving its adolescent phase by erecting controlled religious organizations and institutionally cataloguing its own myths; and then, finally, by reaching adulthood while freeing itself from superstitious and erroneous beliefs. Here we arrive at the age of scientists and savants who will guide mankind towards the ultimate technical “enlightenment.” As a matter of fact, one could see in Frazer’s writing the attempt of solidifying culture under scientific and biological theories ranging from the influence of Darwin to Spencer’s writings (Palmié 2018: 5). In this view, culture is likewise subordinated to the logic of evolution, conceived as a linear progression culminating in science – an ultimate stage of development necessarily preceded by earlier, “primitive” forms such as magic and religion. But, more importantly yet, what Frazer attempted to advance was the idea that a religious view of the world is nothing but an indispensable step regarding the progressive development of humankind; it is a “prescientific stage,” which, curiously enough, is still necessary so that humans may reach the “scientific phase” of cultural evolution. Even if such a perspective once played a necessary role, a religious worldview had, by that period, become long overdue. In light of the intellectual climate of his time, Frazer himself regarded it as no longer tenable.

2. Wittgenstein meets Frazer

The history of Wittgenstein’s interest regarding Frazer’s work is a complex one.³ As a matter of fact, the editorial and translational history of the *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough* (henceforth *RFGB*) has been extensively discussed among specialists, particularly in recent years. As Palmié (2018) has suggested, the most systematic assessments of such an episode can be found in Orzechowski & Pichler (1995), Westergaard (2015) and Rothhaupt (2016). For instance, Rothhaupt (2016) proposes that, even if Wittgenstein’s commentaries comprehend a cohesive whole, the editorial process was nevertheless a polemical one, given that his remarks on Frazer are sparsely scattered throughout different manuscripts. According to him, in order to correctly

³ Frazer and Wittgenstein were teaching at Cambridge at the same time, but scholars still diverge whether they ever had some sort of contact. According to Palmié (2018: 4) there is no indication in this regard whatsoever. On the other hand, however, Rothhaupt (2016: 76–78), makes a strong case that Wittgenstein changed (at least for once) the time of his classes so that he could attend some of Frazer’s lectures.

understand the ensemble of such remarks, one has to go through the MS 107, 108, 109, 110, 111 & 112 (and also the MS 142, MS 153a & the MS 158), just to mention a few of them. Furthermore, such passages (on *The Golden Bough*) are also alluded to, in different forms (even if directly or not), in Typescripts TS 211, 213, 221, 227 & 239.⁴ As a matter of fact, anyone acquainted with Wittgenstein's manuscripts knows for a fact that they mutually influence one another: Wittgenstein often took passages from certain manuscripts into others, usually reworking them, or further suppressing some paragraphs. One thing is certain, though: Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* were not elaborated in order to be published; much on the contrary. According to scholars,⁵ these commentaries were firstly designed to compose what eventually became known among specialists as *The Early Big Typescript* (TS 211). In the end, however, such passages were dropped from the final result of Wittgenstein's considerations – which, today, are also known among researchers as *The Big Typescript* (TS 213). As Hacker (1992) points it out, when it comes to the main *corpus* of Wittgensteinian production, the only direct allusion to such period of inquiry is aphorism §122 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which concerns the correct method of philosophical inquiry.

It was Rush Rhees (one of Wittgenstein's closest students and later his literary executor) who first assembled these notes into what came to be known as the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Yet this editorial process was never truly closed. As Westergaard (2023) shows in his detailed account of the text's historical emergence, Rhees himself remained dissatisfied with subsequent editions and held reservations about how the remarks should be situated within the broader development of Wittgenstein's thought.⁶ As will become clear, different ways of positioning this text within Wittgenstein's *corpus* lead to

⁴ For more on the editorial process and the entire chronology concerning Wittgenstein's comments on Frazer, Rothhaupt (2016: 26–28 and 62–74), provides a comprehensive explanation. At this point, I am following his account regarding this period.

⁵ Both Hacker (1992) and Palmié (2018) agree on this chronology.

⁶ As noted by Westergaard (2023: 227), the chronology of the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* is largely shaped by Rhees's editorial perspective: “[Rhees] continued with his research until 1975, by which time it filled some 350 handwritten and typed pages... Rhees's lecture on ‘Religious Belief. Ritual and Myth’ at King's College in March 1974, his well-known article ‘Wittgenstein on Language and Ritual’ from 1976, and his Tübingen lecture from April 1977 are all outcomes of this immense work”. The constant reworking of these materials well into the final years of Rhees's life indicates the “unresolved” character of his engagement with the text.

correspondingly different interpretations of several notions first articulated in the *Remarks*.

Despite these unresolved editorial questions, Rhees' work was guided primarily by MS 110, the manuscript in which most of the passages concerning *The Golden Bough* first appear. In this sense, the first note on Frazer is registered on Jun. 1931 and it is interesting to notice that Wittgenstein would rework and rearrange his ideas on *The Golden Bough* at least until September/October of that same year, when his *TS 211* was finally typewritten. Therefore, over the course of at least four months, he would have mostly occupied himself with such issue. Intriguingly, between 1948/1950, he would still produce additional notes on *The Golden Bough* as one might be able to observe in his MS 143. As Rhees puts it,⁷ until the end of his life, Wittgenstein was still making notes on that book in order to insert them into the copy that he kept with himself. Therefore, as the manuscripts indicate, a certain continuity can be discerned. Frazer's work plays a sustained role in Wittgenstein's philosophical inquiries. In this sense, Frazer's point of view repeatedly demanded clarification and critical engagement.

3. What does Wittgenstein say about Frazer?

If Wittgenstein took great pains to read Frazer's book, what did he have to say about it? At this point, even if the Austrian was intrigued by Frazer's work, it is interesting to notice that he was equally critical of the notions advanced by the Englishman. It is almost as if Wittgenstein used Frazer in a "sparring" match; whatever was proposed by the latter, the former would certainly oppose. One proficuous source of differentiation between them was Wittgenstein's refusal to accept the fact that Frazer could understand different cultures outside of their primary context. As he would later come to suggest in one of his most cryptic commentaries:

A whole mythology is deposited in our language.

(#24, *RFGB*)⁸

⁷ For more, see Rhees (ed.), Synthese-Edition. Wittgenstein, 1967: 234.

⁸ "In unserer Sprache ist eine ganze Mythologie niedergelegt." (In what follows, I will use the English translation of Palmié, while also making the original text available for reference.)

As Palmié (2018: 2) explains it, by stepping outside of a certain *living* (vital) context, one incurs a series of problems: first, how is one ever able to “translate the *language games* which are absolutely constitutive of other forms of life into those which we found ourselves immersed in?”; secondly, at what cost “do we override their incommensurabilities?”; and third, what “are the entailments of such attempts of translation?” One should note here that at no time does Frazer come to face or even realize the profundity of such questions. He places his bet that all myths, especially the ones related to spring and fertility, are basically the same. They can all be summarized through the death of the high-priest of Nemi, and this episode is what allows for the elaboration of entire religions. But it would be very hard to accommodate such claim by placing emphasis not on the similarities, but rather on the differences between cultures and their historical accounts. In his *When the Bough Breaks*, J. Z. Smith (1973) demonstrates that what Frazer actually does is a *pastiche* of the most different classical texts, arranging different (and sometimes conflicting) accounts of death and fertility found in the most disparate myths while attempting to evoke a common background.⁹ In addition to Frazer’s account being historically incorrect, I believe that someone like Wittgenstein would have also considered that the book was at odds with a more adequate philosophical analysis, which, from now on, would require that one “plow[s] over language in its entirety” (#17, RFGB),¹⁰ by actively engaging with the practices one is attempting to describe. Such a comprehension amounts to saying that Frazer’s sin at this point is twofold: at the expense of an inaccurate method of analysis, he would completely miss the point regarding the emergence of certain phenomena in different cultures; additionally, his tendency to conflate myths of different sorts through historically inaccurate analyses would only aggravate the fact that he would be condemning himself to a lack of understanding even as a foreigner.

Another issue which displays a strong antagonism considering Wittgenstein’s views is the “victory” of science at the expense of religion. Frazer has no qualms about his claim that religion is to be overcome along the years due to the expansion of “civilization.” At this point, Wittgenstein categorically denies Frazer’s claims:

⁹ In another article of his (*In Comparison a Magic Dwells*), Smith points out that the mistake here is to allow for a free reign of the “principle of association,” something very much in vogue at the anthropological accounts of that time. For more, one should take a look at Smith (2020: 25).

¹⁰ “Wir müssen die ganze Sprache durchpflügen.”

Baptism as washing. — An error arises only when magic is interpreted scientifically. (#11, RFGB)¹¹

...

What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! Hence the impossibility of grasping a life different from the English one of his time!

Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times, with all his stupidity and shallowness. (#12, RFGB)¹²

At this juncture, the insights offered by Bill Child (2017) prove particularly illuminating. As we have observed, Frazer saw in religion a secondary step towards the advancement of scientific claims, or, as Child puts it, a phase towards “increasingly sophisticated systems for understanding, predicting, and manipulating the natural world” (2017: 83). Within this evolutionary schema, magic is first replaced by religion, which is ultimately rendered obsolete by the ascendancy of science. But manifestations such as magic or religion would not necessarily have to be “false physics” or “false medicine, technology, etc” (#’15, RFGB). As Wittgenstein suggests, a ritual does not have to be right or wrong; human attitudes can merely “be of [a] ritual nature or belong to a rite” (#’15, RFGB)¹³; they are not required to conform to bipolar truth conditions – being either true or false – as is the case in scientific hypotheses. In sum, using Child’s expression, something like religion can be considered as an “autonomous system of beliefs and practices that people engage in for its own sake” (2017: 83); therefore, one may consider religious engagement as a non-instrumental action that requires commitment simply because one enjoys it or due to the fact that one sees relevance on such type of manifestation.

Therefore, Frazer’s attempt to identify a fundamental pattern by appealing to the “progress” of human societies rests on problematic conceptual assumptions. There would simply not be an all-encompassing *grammar* as he

¹¹ “Die Taufe als Waschung. — Ein Irrtum entsteht erst, wenn die Magie wissenschaftlich ausgelegt wird.”

¹² “Welche Enge des seelischen Lebens bei Frazer! Daher: Welche Unmöglichkeit, ein anderes Leben zu begreifen, als das englische seiner Zeit!” / “Frazer kann sich keinen Priester vorstellen, der nicht im Grunde ein englischer Parson unserer Zeit ist, mit seiner ganzen Dummheit und Flauheit.”

¹³ “Nun aber ist es Unsinn, so fortzufahren, daß man als das Charakteristische dieser Handlungen sagt, sie seien solche, die aus fehlerhaften Anschauungen über die Physik der Dinge entsprängen. (So tut es Frazer, wenn er sagt, Magie sei wesentlich falsche Physik, bzw. falsche Heilkunst, Technik, etc.) Vielmehr ist das Charakteristische der rituellen Handlung gar keine Ansicht, Meinung, ob sie nun richtig oder falsch ist, obgleich eine Meinung – ein Glaube – selbst auch rituell sein kann, zum Ritus gehören kann.”

had once attempted to display. Human beings may participate in practices, or adopt values, that are not oriented towards instrumental purposes. This configuration also helps explain why Frazer's explanatory framework fails to do justice to the kinds of manifestation he aimed to describe.¹⁴ Put simply, his description would be fundamentally limited:

Frazer is far more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be as far removed from an understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. *His* explanations of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves. (#19, RFGB, italics by the author)¹⁵

...

A historical explanation, an explanation in the form of a hypothesis of development is only *one* kind of summary arrangement of the data – of their synopsis. It is equally possible to see the data in their relation to one another and to gather them into a general picture without doing so in the form of a hypothesis concerning temporal development. (#20, RFGB)¹⁶

By allowing for a *universal grammar* to take place, by displacing myths and rituals from their original context, Frazer's method prevents the practices he examines from being understood on their own terms. As a matter of fact, as Wittgenstein points out, Frazer's work is notable for its propensity to *pile up* large amounts of loosely connected materials, brought together with the aim of establishing the backbone behind the myth of the priest of Nemi, the thin organizing *motto* intertwining his entire composition – a narrative axis extended well beyond its original setting and treated as a general explanatory model. From this angle, Wittgenstein's comments here seem to be directed at Frazer's propensity of looking at *social phenomena* in order to establish a singular type of *historical synopsis*, which would have enabled some sort of evolutive schema resulting in ideas similar to that of a "historical law." In this view, Frazer's *synopsis* would have allowed us to develop only one singular regard in relation

¹⁴ Coliva (2022: 162), echoes a similar view: "The realm of values is therefore entirely foreign to scientific theories and explanations, even though these very theories and the technological development they may lead to can raise all sorts of ethical issues".

¹⁵ "Frazer ist viel mehr savage, als die meisten seiner savages, denn diese werden nicht so weit vom Verständnis einer geistigen Angelegenheit entfernt sein, wie ein Engländer des 20sten Jahrhunderts. *Seine* Erklärungen der primitiven Gebräuche sind viel roher, als der Sinn dieser Gebräuche selbst."

¹⁶ "Die historische Erklärung, die Erklärung als eine Hypothese der Entwicklung ist nur *eine* Art der Zusammenfassung der Daten – ihrer Synopsis. Es ist ebenso wohl möglich, die Daten in ihrer Beziehung zu einander zu sehen und in ein allgemeines Bild zusammenzufassen, ohne es in Form einer Hypothese über die zeitliche Entwicklung zu machen."

to the organization of “social data” by stacking them up in an all-encompassing whole (*Zusammenfassung*). Nevertheless, as we can see from aphorism #20 of the *RFGB*, this would have solely been one type of organization. Frazer’s proposal does not provide us with an absolute treatment of the question, let alone an “evolutive law,” which, in (our) contemporary times, still lurks behind Dawkins’ *biological reductionism*, Fukuyama’s *end of history* or even Pinker’s *age of Enlightenment*.¹⁷ As I see it, what Wittgenstein appreciated in someone like Frazer was his capacity of elaborating a schema in which the scientificist *Zeitgeist* of an entire era was the backbone behind a whole theory. The feeling here would be akin to those great movies ending in a moralizing and inventive *grand finale*, which invariably makes one whisper: “*Alas, everything was going so well...*”. (But while the film’s imagery may have been effective, its overarching arguments still remain highly contestable.)

Building on the arguments presented thus far, I propose that a central point of contention lies in Frazer’s scientific outlook, contrasted with Wittgenstein’s forceful critique of the very notion of “objective science” as a vehicle for ultimate progress. I believe that it is the idea of a linear evolution, linked to a universalist and absolutist conception of “human reason” or “universal religion,” what seems completely unacceptable in the Wittgensteinian schema of thought when it comes to Frazer’s proposal.¹⁸ Therefore, apart from Frazer’s status as a leading intellectual figure of his time (Palmié 2018), or from the fact that Wittgenstein’s engagement with *The Golden Bough* may be understood as the culmination of earlier intellectual encounters – whether with Spengler or Goethe (Coliva 2022), or even with Renan (Engelmann 2016) – Wittgenstein’s reading of Frazer should be seen as fundamentally shaped by his opposition to

¹⁷ All of such authors may thus be understood as participating in a shared “post-modern Enlightenment imaginary”: one that comprehends history, based on a normative conception of rationality, as a legible and highly progressive arrangement while also retrospectively organizing social phenomena based on such lenses. In Fukuyama’s schema, the historical diversity of social episodes is also subsumed to an all-encompassing narrative of teleological progression. Pinker likewise advances a broadly progressive narrative, suggesting that contemporary society represents an unprecedented improvement (in both technical and ethical terms) over earlier historical periods. Dawkins, for his part, is a prominent advocate of scientism, which he explicitly situates in opposition to religious belief, understood both as a form of “epistemic prejudice” and also as a very dangerous display of unjustified superstitions. In sum, little has changed since Frazer. If anything, what we have is Frazer on steroids. For more, see Dawkins 2006, Fukuyama 1992, and Pinker 2018.

¹⁸ As a matter of fact, there is a direct quotation on this stance: “It is probably not too much to say that the hope of progress – moral and intellectual as well as material – in the future is bound up with the fortunes of science, and that every obstacle placed in the way of scientific discovery is a wrong to humanity.” (Frazer, 1990: 712).

Frazer's theoretical outlook and by the contrast between their respective *Weltanschauungen*. (As a matter of fact, he had even previously signaled his contempt for scientism on the pages of his *TLP*.)¹⁹

From this angle, Frazer's *Golden Bough* would have also intersected Wittgenstein's views on three specific points. The first point (i) being that language games might be analyzed and understood outside of a ("vital" / "cultural") practical context in which they are inserted. As acknowledged by Robert Ackerman (1987: 1), biographer and anthropologist, Frazer developed sweeping and confident theories on so-called primitive religion and mythology entirely from within the confines of the library, relying heavily on the often simplistic and ethnocentric accounts of missionaries, traders, and explorers. Lacking a nuanced understanding of culture as the complex, conscious and unconscious framework that shapes social behavior and belief, he saw no issue in drawing comparisons across vastly different cultural and historical contexts.

Secondly (ii), Frazer was a staunch proponent of the notion that when all the problems of natural science are solved, there will be no more place for religion – the assumption that religion will be overcome by science:

Thus the keener minds, still pressing forward to a deeper solution of the mysteries of the universe come to reject the religious theory of nature as inadequate, and to revert in a measure to the older standpoint of magic by postulating explicitly, what in magic had only been implicitly assumed, to wit, an inflexible regularity in the order of natural events, which, if carefully observed, enables us to foresee their course with certainty and to act accordingly. ... In short, religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science. (Frazer, 1990: 712)

And, finally, (iii) there was the idea that there is a "universal grammar" related to religious practices, something hidden behind the superficial diversity of religious language games:

it is no wonder that a phenomenon so important, so striking, and so universal should, by suggesting similar ideas, have given rise to similar rites in many lands. (Frazer, 1990: 337)

¹⁹ "Die Ereignisse der Zukunft können wir nicht aus den gegenwärtigen erschließen. Der Glaube an den Kausalnexus ist der Aberglaube. [We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present. Superstition is nothing but belief in the causal nexus.]" (*TLP* 5.1361). Or more importantly yet: "Wir fühlen, daß selbst, wenn alle möglichen wissenschaftlichen Fragen beantwortet sind, unsere Lebensprobleme noch gar nicht berührt sind. [We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.]" (*TLP* 6.52).

As I hope to have demonstrated, points (i), (ii) and (iii) would have been completely unacceptable to Wittgenstein.

4. Historical systematization and Wittgenstein's later concepts

Drawing on this proposal, we can also assume that it is the examination – and also the “historical systematization” – under which Frazer submit “religious forms of life” what allows for the “embryonic development” of part of Wittgenstein’s main instruments (concepts) of analysis related to his “second phase.” It remains to be explored, therefore, if concepts such as *übersichtliche Darstellung*, *Sprachspiel* and *Lebensform* were all firstly and coherently applied somehow – even if not directly, or nominally so to speak – along the pages of this critique directed at Frazer’s ideas. The case of *übersichtliche Darstellung*, which can be directly verified in the passages of the *RFGB*, is arguably the most widely discussed aspect in this regard:

And so the chorus points to a secret law is what one might want to say about Frazer’s collection of facts. Now, I can represent this law, this idea, in the form of a hypothesis of development, but also in analogy to the schema of a plant, I can represent it as the schema of a religious ceremony, or again by grouping the facts alone in a ‘perspicuous’ presentation [*übersichtlichen Darstellung*]. (#22, *RFGB*, my emphasis)²⁰

It is based on this background, for instance, that Hacker (2009: 309)²¹ translates the notion of *übersichtliche Darstellung* as “surveyable representation,” characterizing it as an attainable “overview” of our linguistic practices that allows one to grasp the “linguistic environs of a problematic expression.” Such an “overview,” he argues, is not a theoretical achievement but a practical capacity: the ability to know one’s way around, or what to do with language.²²

²⁰ “Und so deutet das Chor auf ein geheimes Gesetz” möchte man zu der Frazer’schen Tatsachensammlung sagen. Dieses Gesetz, diese Idee, kann ich nun durch eine Entwicklungshypothese darstellen oder auch, analog dem Schema einer Pflanze, durch das Schema einer religiösen Zeremonie, oder aber durch die Gruppierung des Tatsachenmaterials allein, in einer ‘übersichtlichen’ Darstellung.”

²¹ This volume was written by both Hacker and Baker, but this passage was produced exclusively by Hacker due to disagreements with the latter. Hence, it is attributed here to him.

²² Here is Hacker (2009: 309–310): “When one has an overview of a conceptual field, one knows one’s way around. Knowing one’s way around a conceptual field consists in the ability to specify connections, exclusions, analogies and disanalogies that make it possible to dissolve and resolve philosophical problems. An overview is something one *has* when one can see across a landscape from on high – or across a wide field of concepts and their connections.”

By resisting a hypothetical-deductive scientific model and instead prioritizing clarification through description, Hacker understands that Wittgenstein assigns “surveyability” a decisive role in religious discourse, where the aim is not explanatory theorizing but understanding the use of words within a determinate symbolic context as we have seen. On this interpretation, the *RFGB* would already presuppose a pre-operative methodological orientation that would also be later verified in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.

At this point, however, interpretations diverge. One could even argue that this issue lies at the heart of the “partial split” between “the duo” Hacker and Baker. Unlike the former, Baker (2004) approaches the notion from a distinctly therapeutic background, where the aim is to dissolve philosophical problems rather than to “tackle” them. On this reading, Baker resists the idea of the continuation of a method; instead, *übersichtliche Darstellung* seems to designate whatever form of clarification proves effective in dissolving a particular philosophical confusion. Consequently, the connection with the *RFGB* is downplayed: there is no “genetic association” at work, but rather a circumstantial employment of the notion at best.

A more nuanced approach is offered by Coliva (2022: 161). Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy is indeed “motivated by an aspiration to clarity and perspicuous representation” – an aspiration aimed at dissolving misunderstandings that arise from the inadequate employment of a wide range of conceptual schemes in contexts where they are neither suitable nor needed. But, as Coliva (2022: 151) emphasizes, this clarificatory task does not operate in isolation. Rather, it finds its origin in “a comparative task centered on the different aspects of the rituals; [one that] involve[s] relating them to other partly similar, partly different rituals while looking for ‘intermediate links’.” What I find particularly compelling about this view is that it preserves the aspirations of “Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy” while also retaining the “anthropologic pull” that characterizes his later work.²³

²³ There are additional lines of analysis as well. Gebauer (2017), for instance, coming from a non-analytic background, offers a different understanding. What is interesting in this passage of history, according to him, is not necessarily the “pre-operation” of determined concepts that were later relevant for the establishment of Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy. Among other things, the *RFGB* must be understood as part of a series of exercises in “aspect seeing,” a form of theoretical practice that marks what he terms as the “anthropological turn” in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. It is all about an exercise “in starting over and over again anew, a set of intramundane mental exercises aimed at giving oneself value through the perspicuity of thought” (2017: 31). Another possibility is to approach this problem from the perspective

As the reader may have realized at this point, while much has been discussed about this passage, particularly concerning the first appearance of the concept of *übersichtliche Darstellung* in the RFGB (in addition to the role it plays afterwards), the emergence of the idea of *games* against a linguistic background, especially in the excerpt on the Beltrane festival, has received comparatively little careful analysis. Could we extract from this small excerpt the first coherent application of fundamental philosophical topics such *Sprachspiel* and *Lebensform*? At this point, I think that more needs to be “unearthed”:

When I speak of the inner nature of the practice, I mean all of those circumstances in which it is carried out and that are not included in the report on such a festival, because they consist not so much in particular actions that characterize the festival than in what one might call the spirit of the festival that would be described, for example, if one were to describe the kind of people that take part in it, their usual way of behaving [on other occasions] — that is, their character — and the **kind of games they play** at other times. (#42, RFGB, my emphasis)²⁴

Curiously, it was Rhees himself who, while organizing the Remarks into the unified account we know, seems to suggest this very same idea:

If we are looking for the origin of the use of language games as a philosophical method, then I think that one source or one influence was this reflexion on the analogy of metaphysics and magic, and on Frazer’s misunderstanding of the magic about which he was writing... I think this discussion of magic shows something very important about the use of language games.²⁵

However, even if this notion is present in this initial engagement with the text (in Rhees’ letter), it does not appear to have generated as much commotion as the other notion (*übersichtliche Darstellung*) introduced before. A notable exception is Westergaard (2023: 213), who, by closely following the chronology of Rhees’ textual edition, alludes to the possibility that “the remarks have to be

of more “aesthetic demands,” by considering what Wittgenstein articulates in his *Culture and Value*. On this point, see Säätelä (2013) and Savickey (2014).

²⁴ “Wenn ich von der inneren Natur des Gebrauchs rede, meine ich alle Umstände, in denen er geübt wird und die in dem Bericht von so einem Fest nicht enthalten sind, da sie nicht sowohl in bestimmten Handlungen bestehen, die das Fest charakterisieren, als in dem was man den Geist des Festes nennen könnte, welcher beschrieben würde indem man z.B. die Art von Leuten beschriebe, die daran teilnehmen, ihre übrige Handlungsweise, d.h. ihren Charakter, *die Art der Spiele, die sie sonst spielen*.”

²⁵ Letter from Rush Rhees to G. H. von Wright 25 Oct. 1962, Coll. 714.200, NFL., *apud* Westergaard, *ibid.*, pp. 207–208.

viewed and understood in the context of Wittgenstein's language-philosophical investigations and his later use of 'language games' as a 'philosophical method'." In Westergaard's account, the subsequent fate of the *RFGB* is strongly connected to Rhees' lack of success in terms of editorial decisions. Rhees interpreted these passages in consonance with other writings, such as the *Lecture on Ethics* and *On Certainty* (henceforth *OC*), and even attempted to produce an edition in which these works would appear together; his later "fall-out" with Anscombe may have contributed to the fate of the text. It was Anscombe who insisted in a separate edition of *OC*, and the links between these compositions, as initially proposed by Rhees, eventually "waned." Had Rhees' unified edition appeared earlier, might it have altered the fate of the *RFGB*? Ifs and buts do not win matches, yet the similarities once alluded by Rhees have begun to be noticed again. Coliva (2023), for instance, suggests that the mythologies deposited in our languages – one of Wittgenstein's strongest claims in the *RFGB* – reappear in *OC* even if dressed as "hinge propositions" this time.²⁶ On this reading, our linguistic frameworks unfold through promises that, over time, may come to reveal themselves as nothing more than "sedimented" mythologies in the games we play.

In conclusion, it is my view that the importance of *the Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* lies in the recognition that understanding a language-game is conditioned by a practical "conversion" rather than by external comprehension. Religion, in the case of Wittgenstein, constitutes the first terrain on which this requirement became visible: religious discourse admits of description but resists understanding from without given that its symbolic articulation is inseparable from the form of life – and its constitutive mythology – within which it is enacted or displayed. However, this is not a peculiarity of religion: once any form of necessity is no longer conceived metaphysically but as a normative feature internal to rule-governed practices, "conversion" becomes the general condition of intelligibility for language-games as such.²⁷ Those who do not "convert" themselves, as in the case of Frazer, do not

²⁶ For more, see Coliva (2022: 158–159). Her idea is that "...our "picture of the world" (*Weltbild*) and that they perform a function similar to that of the rules of a game and are a kind of "mythology" (*OC* 93– 97) ... These hinge propositions, therefore, make evidence and justification possible which, in turn, make knowledge possible in various fields. In their turn, they cannot be proved or refuted, because they help determine what counts as proof and refutation. In this sense they are the "background," as Wittgenstein calls it, against which we determine truth and falsity".

²⁷ See, for instance, Cavell (1978: xx), on the "shock of conversion" required for the reception of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

understand what is truly at stake in any form of analysis. In this sense, the *RFGB* are paradigmatic of what was to come.

5. Concluding Remarks

In sum, I believe that Wittgenstein's later concepts can already be "unearthed" from a more careful analysis of *The Golden Bough*; for as I see it, at the very least, this text anticipates the crucial employment of certain notions that later would come to be applied in the subsequent phases of Wittgenstein's philosophical transformation. In this regard, my proposal also allows for a renewed consideration regarding the importance that the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* may actually display within the whole of Wittgenstein's writings, his "intermediary period," and his "reverence" for religious feelings, which directly intertwines with his notion of "forms of life."

Moreover, it is also important to consider that Wittgenstein's critique was highly relevant for the unfolding of the conception of religion in several other philosophical discussions too. The failure of such universalizing accounts, especially when it comes to religion, lies precisely in their disregard for differences: when philosophers attempt to "see everything in everything," they risk overlooking the very distinctions that define the subject under examination. Thus, if one takes this critique seriously and extends it into the field of religious studies, the implications are profound. Accepting Wittgenstein's view – that religious expressions are embedded in distinct language games and forms of life – means adopting a methodological posture that resists homogenization. Religious traditions cannot be treated as variations of a single core structure; they differ in the principles they affirm, the practices they permit, and the beliefs they sustain. Recognizing this irreducible diversity not only reshapes the theoretical approach to religion but also repositions the philosopher before religious experience itself, demanding greater attentiveness to its particularities and the frameworks in which they emerge – something that Frazer and his peers were unable to understand.²⁸

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