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Reason and Religion: Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa Lectures
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Lecture III: “The Crowd of Thoughts Stuck in the Exit: The Consolations of Wittgenstein”

1. Frazer’s account of magic
 - a. Not adequate
 - b. Not what we wanted
2. Wittgenstein’s solace
 - a. “Seeing the connections”
 - b. Pork, Boswell, philosophy
3. Hume on the origins of religion
 - a. The genetic account
 - b. Its discontents
4. *Da capo*, “Of Miracles”
 - a. Can one “take the proposition simply”?
 - b. Perils of philosophy

Some quotations:

- (a) “Frazer says that it is very hard to discover the error in magic – and that is why it has lasted so long – because, for example, an incantation that is supposed to bring rain certainly seems efficacious sooner or later. But then it is surely remarkable that people don’t realize earlier that sooner or later it’s going to rain anyhow.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (b) “[Toward] morning, when the sun is about to rise, rites of daybreak are celebrated by the people, but not during the night, when they simply burn lamps.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (c) “It can indeed happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized 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.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (d) “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.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (e) “... a strange and recurring tragedy ... 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 withered leaves under foot, the lapping of cold water upon 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.” (Frazer, *The Golden Bough*)

- (f) “[Empirical conjectures] will be of little help to someone, say, who is upset because of love. — It will not calm him.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (g) “A man may wonder what to make of his life. He may be bewildered by the sort of person he finds himself to be.” (Rhees, “Sexuality”)
- (h) “*And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack.
And you may find yourself in another part of the world.
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile.
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife.
And you may ask yourself: Well, ... How did I get here?*”
(Talking Heads, “Once in a Lifetime”)
- (i) “For what struck *us* as being queer about thought and thinking was not at all that it had curious effects which we were not yet able to explain (causally). Our problem, in other words, was not a scientific one; but a muddle felt as a problem. ... And when we are worried about the nature of thinking, the puzzlement which we wrongly interpret to be one about the nature of a medium is a puzzlement caused by the mystifying use of our language.” (Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*)
- (j) “[A] perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we ‘see the connections’.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (k) “[What] I see in those stories is nevertheless acquired through the evidence, including such evidence as does not appear to be directly connected with them,—through the thoughts of man and his past, through all the strange things I see, and have seen and heard about, in myself and others.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (l) “The crowd of thoughts which cannot come out, because they all want to rush forward and thus get stuck in the exit.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)
- (m) “[It] can only be produced by unraveling the real web of associations, which have been wound round any subject by nature, and the unavoidable conditions of humanity.” (Hazlitt, “Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles”)
- (n) “[A] Gordian complication of feelings, which must take time to unravel and care to keep it unraveled.” (Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey)
- (o) “[It] is not sufficiently considered, that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.” (Johnson, *The Rambler*)
- (p) “[There] are dangers connected with eating and drinking, not only for savages but also for us; nothing is more natural than the desire to protect oneself from these; and now we could devise such preventative measures ourselves. —But according to what principle are we to invent them? Obviously, according to the one by which all dangers are reduced to the form of a few very simple ones which are immediately evident to man. ... Personification will, of course, play

a large role in these simple pictures, for, as everyone knows, men (hence spirits) can become dangerous to mankind.” (Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”)

- (q) “[The problems of philosophy] are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in spite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. ...

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

- (r) “Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, men scrutinize, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.” (Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*)
- (s) “The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, [which is,] if not an original instinct, [then] at least a general attendant of human nature.” (Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*)
- (t) “The mind, sunk into diffidence, terror, and melancholy, has recourse to every method of appeasing those secret intelligent powers, on whom our fortune is supposed entirely to depend.” (Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*)
- (u) “Why, Sir, Hume, taking the proposition simply, is right. But the Christian revelation is not proved by the miracles alone, but as connected with prophecies, and with the doctrines in confirmation of which the miracles were wrought.” (Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*)
- (v) “Am I to say they are unreasonable? I wouldn’t call them unreasonable. ‘Unreasonable’ implies, with everyone, rebuke. I would say, they are certainly not *reasonable*, that’s obvious. Not only is it not reasonable, but it doesn’t pretend to be.” (Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*)
- (w) “For a blunder, that’s too big.” (Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*)
- (x) “This thing that looks like a hand isn’t just a superb imitation—it really is a hand. ... Shouldn’t I be more likely to consider it nonsense, which admittedly did have the form of a piece of information? ... The background is lacking for it to be information.” (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*)